Stories for the Young

Pentachord

A Collection of 5 Short Stories

- M.K.Raina

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A Word from Author

'Pentachord' is my second book of short stories, and the first in English. My first book of short stories 'tsók módúr in Kashmiri language was published last year on Navreh.

I have not been very much inclined to write short stories in a language other than Kashmiri. So I don't consider myself even an amateur writer in English language. One of my stories in Kashmiri 'nåsîhath' (from the 'tsók módúr' collection), was translated into English by a well wisher of mine, and the story was published in the 'Milchar' of Mumbai under the title 'Advice'. Since this story dealt with the innocence and psyche of small school going children in the background of our way of living during the old days in Kashmir, the story was liked by many, young and old. This encouraged me to write another short story 'The Last Game' in English, English - because our children do not have much interest in Kashmiri language and the parents, by and large, do not seem to be inclined to promote this language any more, though as a writer in Kashmiri language, I wish I could prove myself wrong. 'The Last Game' also dealt with the same subject and the background as that of 'Advice'.

In order to keep the Kashmir scenario restricted to my stories in Kashmiri, I took up entirely different subjects with different backgrounds to the taste of young and wrote three more stories. Story 'Charu & the Witch' deals with the character of a witch and a lone boy's pledge to save his friend from her clutches. 'Three Questions' carries forward our ancient legacy of story writing, where the main character is asked to search for correct answers to a number of questions, so as to enable him to marry a princess, or claim right to his ancestral treasures, or the like. 'Kaal Chakra' has yet a different plot, where a boy killed by his cousin, is resurrected decades after his soul wandered in search of a body.

Some of these stories have already appeared in our community magazines and are now published in a consolidated form as 'Pentachord'. I hope the young ones will like these stories and the elders, if some of them go through the pages, will try to catch me for my weak points.

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April 10, 2005

Advice

His name was Avtar but we would call him Nika*. Nika was not nika, as the name would suggest. In fact he was more robust than all of us, but the nickname coined by his parents for him in his childhood, became popular. We would also love to call him Nika.

We were in all four bosom friends, Nika, Raja, Vijay and me. We would call Vijay by his nickname Toja. Why was this name given to him, we did not know. His grandfather, an army man gave him this name. Toja was very good at mathematics and was able to do even toughest calculations on his fingertips. We were studying in the same class and in the same school. We would also do our home work collectively.

Nika was our undsiputed leader. In fact, the question of not accepting him as leader never arose. We obeyed his orders without a fuss. Keeping his physique in view, no body ever dared question his authority. Initially, I did not succumb myself to his authority, but in due course of time, it was clear to me that Nika was a

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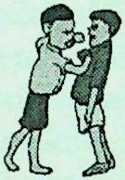
* A pet name equivalnt to Chhotu

born leader.

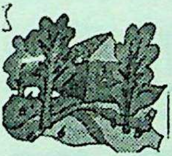
Nika was a leader in the real sense. He would feel very uneasy, seeing any one of us in trouble. If anybody at the school ever dared to snatch our book or threaten us, Nika would beat him black and blue. This was true in our mohalla also. If some one from other mohalla came to tease us, Nika would confront him even before we could flex our muscles.



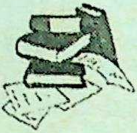
Results of the 7th standard were declared. We had all passed. Those days, only two categories mattered, 'Pass' or 'Fail'. Who would bother for 'Division' and 'Percentage'? Such things were to be given priority at 8th, 10th and higher standards only. Normally, all hard working students would get second division. Those with first division, were considered fortunate and worth praise. If one got higher percentage in second division, he would be called a high-class second divisioner, or so to say, equivalent to a first divisioner. Nika and I would generally get the high-class third division. I was always amused to look at my marks, because only such marks would guarantee me leadership status after Nika. And this, every one of us accepted with pride.

It was an early Sunday morning. Nika called out to me from his window. I left my breakfast and reached his home. All my friends were there. Nika, on way to his maternal uncle's place the pervious day, had witnessed large crowds at Habba Kadal. People in thousands, were buying and selling second-hand books on the spans of the bridge. Nika was very eager to tell us this story yesterday itself, but could not return home, for, his maternal uncle had invited him to dinner as he had passed the 7th standard examination.

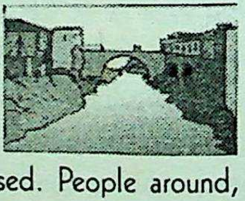
We were glad to hear all this. For long, we had been thinking of picnicking at Nishat and Shalimar gardens, but could not, for lack of finance. After all, we needed money to pay at least for the bus fare. We could not go on foot. Our parents hardly managed to pay our school fee of seven and a half annas. Actually the fee was only seven annas, but each of us would, on the very first day of the month, fondly relish half an apple for one half anna, and it would keep us going for the month. That was all. There was no question of thinking about anything else, more so about a picnic. Now there was some hope of our dreams being materialised.



We decided to take our old books along and reach Habba Kadal. My books would be kept separately from others and sold last of all. My books were as good as new. I had not even opened these books in the classroom for the whole year. But yes, two of my classmates had imprinted their names on the front and back covers of the books respectively. Our teacher, Mahi Kakh was very particular that all the boys had their own set of books. These two class mates of mine would show him my books to escape punishment as both of them had sold their books to Rasul Karawol*, long back.



All of us took our books and walked a mile to reach Habba Kadal. It was really a scene worth watching. Boys were shouting at the pitch of their voice, "Teesree Jamaat Ke Liye, Chhatti Jamaat Ke Liye, Chothi Jamaat Ke Liye ..." and so on. There was a sea of people. Prospective buyers were going through each and every page of the book to arrive at a price. 'How much for a book and how much for the full set?' was being discussed. People around, were also giving their opinion. Books in good condition fetched half the original price. And those in bad



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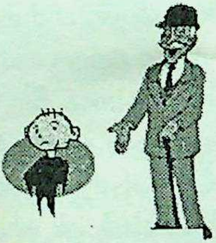
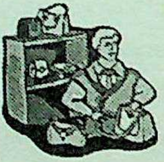
* **Grain parcher**

shape were priced lower. Nika whispered, as if sharing a secret, "Don't open your books. We will first take a round of the entire area to ascertain the standard price, and only then offer our books for sale." We kept going across the bridge from one bank to other, ascertaining the trends, when we came across a group of people offering higher rates. We took out our books from the bag. There were 18 books in all, except mine, six in a set. We had purchased them at four rupees and eight annas a set, and it could fetch us two rupees and four annas per set at half the price. But it was not to be. The condition of our books was pathetic. One of the books was fully dyed in blue-black ink while the other had first three pages missing. Two of the books were without cover pages and yet another was retrieved from a pond of waste water. The condition of rest of the books was also pitiable. We sold three sets for five rupees and thanked our stars.

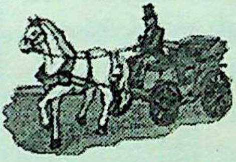
It was time to sell my books now. Some customers around, were demanding books in good condition like that of mine, but Nika was not in hurry. A turban wearing old man, knowing that we had a good set of books in

hand, followed us for quite some distance. But Nika ridiculed him in a manner as if Nika was a renowned wholesaler and he, a menial retailer. Old man pleaded, " Hey, why not sell your books to me? I offer you two annas more than the half price." Nika retorted, "Oh, don't show me your two annas. We will not sell them for less than three rupees." Old man left disappointed. A boy in the crowd, who was accompanied by his father, was in look out for 7th standard books. This boy was just one like us but his father had a beaming stature. He wore a Karakuli cap and by his talks, looked well like a 'Sahab'. There was a man selling look-like-new books at the other end of the bridge. He would grab as many books as he could in the first instance at a lower price and sell them at exorbitant rates later. Sahab was not interested because the books he showed him, still carried marks sufficient to put them in the older category. Sahab was ready to pay a higher price but would accept only the best stuff.

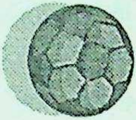




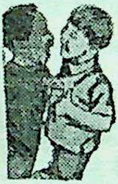
Nika was impressed by this customer. He liked the language and the tone Sahab used. Sahab talked to us very lovingly and referred to us as his dear ones. "He will be a good pay master", Nika told us in confidence. "We do have a set of books of your choice Sir," Nika told Sahab, " But we must get the right price". Sahab was quick to answer, "Then what are you waiting for? I have got enough money to pay you". Nika took Sahab aside and asked us to show him the books. Sahab was amused and said, "Look, my dear ones! There are so many enemies here and they are jealous. In no time will they get around and start giving lectures. Why don't you all come to my home and settle the deal there. You can also have a cup of tea with me". Nika nodded in affirmation, as if Sahab was doing exactly what Nika had wanted. He looked at our faces in a manner, telling us, "Look! This is called the art of choosing a good customer".



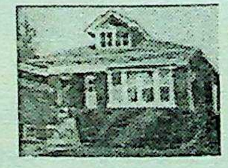
Sahab tightened his grip over the books and said, "Come on, follow me". A little further, he called for a tonga and whispered into tongawallas ear. We could not hear what he said. We boarded the carriage. It was a pleasure to take a free ride. I asked Nika in a low tone, "Where are we going?" He retorted, "Don't behave like a fool. Why should we bother for that? Let him take us anywhere." I kept mum. Our other two friends were shaking their



legs in a manner as if they only were pulling the tonga. I befriended Sahab's son and started talking to him. He was fond of playing football but would not know technicalities of the game. I told him not to worry and assured to train him in the game. I had once watched Sultan's team and Majid's team play football at Dewan Bagh.

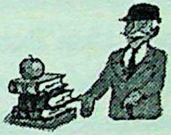


When Majid's team scored a goal over the rival team, Majid shouted, "Oh goal!" Sultan slapped him hard on his face, saying, "You ought to have whistled to register a goal. Where is your whistle?" But Majid had no whistle with him. I asked Sahab's son to arrange for a whistle first and I would take care of the rest.



Tonga stopped. We all alighted and Sahab paid the fare to tongawalla. We followed Sahab. After a long trek through the narrow lanes and by-lanes, we finally reached Sahab's home. His house was a big one, five windows wide. The courtyard was cemented. Sahab asked us to be seated in the drawing room and he himself went into another room. We were all eager to have a cup of tea along with a crisp Bakirkhwani.

Sahab returned a little later, followed by his servant carrying a Samavar. Sahab's son placed cups in front of us and the servant poured Kashmiri Kahwa into them. We waited for a long time but there were no Bakirkhwanis. Nika was about to open his mouth when Sahab commented, "Why don't you finish your tea? Look, we have to then sit and finalise the deal". We concluded that no Bakirkhwanis were coming and sipped the tea somehow. Sahab arranged the books on his table and started going through their pages, one by one. This took him about half an hour. We were worried as it was getting late and moreover, we had left our homes without informing anybody. At last, Sahab raised his head. He handed over all the books to his son, placed his spectacles on the table and with a long sigh, said, "Everything is fine with the books, but there is a problem." We could not get him and instead gazed at him with abated breath. Sahab explained in detail, "Look here. A new set of books costs four rupees and eight annas. Half of it would be two rupees and four annas. But two other boys have also read these books and their names are inscribed on the books. Hence the half price will further be halved twice, reducing the net



price to nine annas." Toja immediately calculated the price on his fingertips and nodded in confirmation. Nika's face turned red with anger and Toja hung his face down. I pleaded with Sahab, "Sir, I have never read these books myself, how could the others. These inscriptions have been made by two of my classmates, just to escape masterji's wrath". Nika confirmed my explanation but Sahab would not listen. He said, "Look my son, this is the established method of accounting. If you talk of sharing love and affection, I am for it. Whenever you happen to pass this way, you should come in without any reservations. You can always treat this house as your own." Nika went pale. I was almost paralysed. Nika said, " Well sir, in that case, please return us our books". Sahab replied, "Oh yes, I would have done it gladly, but see, Guda ji has already written his name on the books". We turned back. Sahab's son was writing his name on the books with a thick bamboo pen. We had no choice. We kept looking at Sahab pleadingly, but it had no effect on him. Meanwhile, Guda ji picked up the books and went into the adjoining room. Sahab called out to him and said "Come on. Don't we have to get your note books?" He began preparing to leave again. Look-

ing at us, he asked, " So, what have you decided now? I am getting late". Our condition was very pitiable. I whispered into Nika's ears, "Better accept whatever he pays." Nika asked Sahab to pay the price he had arrived at. Sahab said, "Oh yes, why not?" And Sahab took some money out of his pocket and handed to Nika. Nika counted and exclaimed to Sahab, "But Sir, how is it, you are paying me only five annas". Sahab smiled and said, "Well, did not pay you any less. You know, I paid your tonga fare of four annas. That much I have deducted. Did I do anything wrong?" We were all dumbstruck, looking helplessly at Sahab. Sahab continued, "Well, you are like my own sons. Take one anna more". Sahab handed one more anna to Nika. We felt we had no legs to stand upon. It was 2.00 O'clock now.

There was a tonga on the road. Nika asked the tongawalla, "Bhai, which area is this". "It is Zaina Kadal", he replied. We looked at one another's face, "So far from our homes, and how do we go from here". Nika gathered some strength and asked him, "Bhai, will you take us to Bal Garden?" "Why not?" Tongawalla replied. We boarded the tonga. Tongawalla mushed his horse and

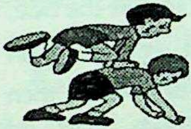
the horse galloped quickly. Several thoughts crossed my mind. How to enter home and what do I tell my parents? My mind was busy, drafting various explanations I would give to my parents, when the tonga halted with a jerk. I heard the tongawalla asking us to alight. I looked around. We had reached Bal Garden. Nika asked him, "Bhai, how much do we have to pay". "You are like my own sons. Pay me only six annas", replied the tongawalla, patting his horse with affection. Nika paid him six annas, the amount Sahab had paid for my books.

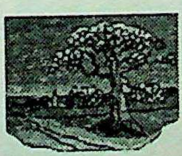
Before parting our ways, we rested a while, on the roadside parapet wall. I still had the jute rope with which I had tied my books, in my hand. I was heart broken. I looked at Nika. He was pale and expressionless. I held his hand and said, "Whatever has happened, is past. But take my advice now. Don't sell books to a sahab next year".

The Last Game

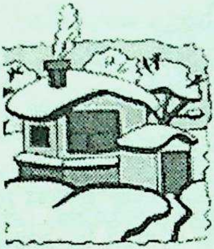
Their's was called the 'Gang of Six'. Eldest among them was Lalji and he was 14 years old. All of them lived close to one another in the densely populated locality of Maniyar.

The name was not given to them for nothing. It was coined by Sama Kakh, a retired police officer of the locality, after giving due consideration to the boys' life style and activities. The six, Sama Kakh said, had, as per his knowledge, broken all records of being in one another's close company for such a long time. Frankly speaking, the boys were seen together right from the day they were enrolled in a near-by primary school, eight years back. Their meeting point was the shadowy space under a big Mulbery tree, in the middle of their mohalla, which they had cleaned and converted into a nice sitting place. They were there, except during rains & snow, every evening, doing their home work, discussing the issues they thought were important to them,

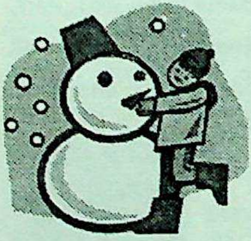




planning their picnic trips and eating ***Shahtul*** (a large reddish-black, acidic and deliciously flavoured fruit), by climbing up the tree, one branch reserved for each boy. And they had the exclusive right to the fruit by virtue of having engraved their names with a knife, on the trunk of the tree.

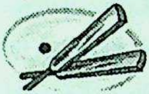


During heavy snow fall in winter, they would invariably mould a Snowman by rolling snow, placing it vertically up at a fixed spot, resting it against the tree, and shaping it well like a fat man's torso. They would then place on it, a spherical head made up of snow again and also attach the limbs. It was the duty of Ramji, the youngest among them, to engrave and mark with soft charcoal, the Snowman's ears, eyes, nose and mouth. An old Kangri (Kashmiri Fire-pot) was also placed near by, to give a colourful touch to the artefact. And this Snowman was there to represent the 'Gang' till early spring when it would melt and vanish.



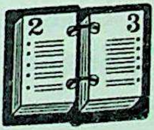
All this was till Lalji got a transistor radio as gift from his Delhi based cousin, with

the added information that India-England Cricket Series was about to commence in England and they could hear the running commentary live on it. This changed their schedules altogether.



It was not that they had not seen or listened to a radio earlier. In fact, two of them have had radio sets in thier homes, but they were of no use to them. Their parents would switch on the radios only for the news, being least interested in the games. Now, this transistor set gave them the immense pleasure of listening to what they wanted, at their own will.

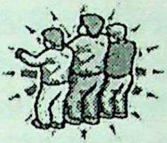
Lalji was now busy, collecting information about the cricket matches to be played at various places in various countries. He got a new notebook and kept each and every information handy. Before the India-England Series got underway, Lalji had maintained record of all matches to be played over a period of one year. He would now occasionally be seen absent from the 'Gang'. Others were least worried, knowing fully that he was on the 'job'.



None of the boys ever played cricket, or even watched a match before. But they had heard about it from their senior schoolmates. Lalji's cousin had informed them that the game was so tough that even the big powers like America, Soviet Union and Japan were scared of indulging in this deadly game. This however did not diminish the boys' interest in cricket. They waited anxiously for the first match between the two countries, commentary of which really came live on the little transistor radio during late evening hours. There was some confusion initially, in understanding the words and phrases used by commentators which they overcame at the end of the first match spanning 5 days of play. All through the match, they were seen sitting beneath the Mulbery tree till midnight when under tremendous pressure from their elders, they had to disperse to their homes to have dinner and sleep.

This new development gave Lalji an added responsibility. Being senior, it was his duty to know more about the game. So, every day he would put lot of questions to his seniors and teachers and share the information with his mates. He would also give his comments, to impress others that he was picking up the game fast. After conclusion of the first match, the boys had known a lot about the game, or atleast they thought so.

By end of the test series of five



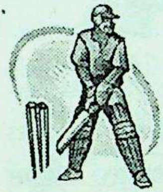
matches, Lalji and his team had a fairly good knowledge of the game. They were now aware of most of the rules. At times, they would also analyse the comments of a commentator and pronounce their judgement. And in the heart of hearts, they thought they were perfect players as well. "We are ready to prove our mettle, only if a team from other locality was ready to play with us", Lalji announced. Others cheered.

They needed eleven people to form a team and they were only six. But this did not pose any problem. The barbed wire fenced plot of land, half a mile away from their home, which was recently purchased by one of their neighbours to construct his new house, was too small to accommodate eleven persons to field. Moreover, they thought they could always invite a couple of boys from the gathering to field for them on a bigger ground, if need be. And to bat, they decided that during a match with a rival team, five of them would bat twice.

So, on an auspicious day, the boys finally announced launch of their cricket team. They arranged four stumps, three for the batting end and one for the runners end, in the shape of small lengths of mulbery branches. A new bat was available in the market at rupees ten which they could not afford. After pooling all their pocket money and the additional grant, which one of them received from his parents, they were able to make four rupees. Lalji, who was the natural choice for the captainship because of his age, volunteered to get a selected piece of willow firewood from his home. This piece of wood was given to a carpenter, who got it beautifully transformed into a bat. Knowing that they had no more than four rupees on their body, the carpenter charged them only that amount and also gifted them a wooden ball. Boys were all thrilled. Now they thought, they were in a position to challenge any team. But Lalji's views were different. He thought it was wise to practice for at least a couple of days, before they challenge any body.

Next Sunday, they went to the 'play ground' fully equipped and took along a dozen of children much less than their age to watch them play and clap. They decided the batting order by drawing lots. Lalji was overwhelmed with joy as he was to bat first and Kundan, the last man to

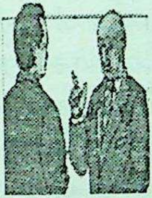
bat, was to bowl first. Lalji gave some useful instructions to Kundan. 'How to bowl a fast ball and how to deliver a spin?' Kundan nodded his head, confirming his grasp of the things. Lalji took charge as opener and looked around in a manner of a great batsman looking out for weakly defended territories. He was set to receive the first ball but wanted to receive a trial one first to gain confidence. He took the stance and signaled Kundan to bowl. Kundan delivered a fast ball, which took some time to reach Lalji. Lalji hit the ball forcefully. But it was dead before it could reach back to the bowler. Children clapped.



Now was the time to deliver first 'official' ball of the hour. Kundan came running from quite some distance and threw the ball. Lalji took a step forward to make it bigger this time, and in a flash, he was clean bowled, the middle stump thrown two yards away licking dust. Lalji's bat was still in the air. Children behind him clapped again as Lalji stood motionless with his cheeks red.

It was the turn of Raghu now. He was two years younger to Lalji but had robust health and wide chest.

Kundan was spinning the ball in his hands. Having sent the first ball very 'fast', he made up his mind to send a 'spin' this time. As soon as he delivered the ball, which was anything but spin, Raghu moved to his left and hit the ball high in the air, and through a large glass window right into the attic of a bungalow at the boundary. Glass panes came crashing down. Raghu was terror-stricken. A baldy, his eyes red with anger, peeped out of the window and yelled. Before the boys could assess the situation, a servant came running from the bungalow and caught Raghu by neck. Soon after came the baldy with the wooden ball, his white shirt miserably splashed with tea. He slapped Raghu hard on his face. Raghu fell on the ground. Baldy was mad. He continued to thrash Raghu with his fist and foot. Lalji, as leader of the team, intervened and pleaded for mercy, only to get a hard slap from the servant. This provocated Kundan. He came running from his position and caught servant's raised hand, and in a moment, Kundan was



thrown away by the baldy with a kick. Children sitting at the fence were now crying and weeping and abusing the baldy and his servant. The baldy 'captured' Raghu and Lalji and would not leave them unless they pay for two glass panes, a china clay cup and laundry charges for the shirt. All this amounted to rupees eight. Boys did not have a penny and the baldy would not let them go. All the boys were weeping and wailing. A passer-by intervened. He pleaded with the baldy to lower his costs. Baldy, taking a linient view, offered a two-rupee discount on the cost of damages, but the boys had nothing. The passer-by mediated a deal. Boys were asked to part with their bat and the ball, which according to their own confession, was valued at rupees four. Making sure that they had no money to pay the balance, and seeing them in tears, the baldy was further moved. He let them go with the promise that they would pay the balance next morning.

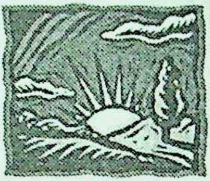
The baldy was gone and so were his servant and the passer-by. The boys started towards their home in a perfect line, Lalji at their head and the children at the tail. All of them had their heads down. Lalji, Raghu and Kundan were still rubbing their body parts to eliminate pain. There was no weight to be carried back home. Stumps were not removed from the ground. They were kept standing there as a token of the Gang's entry into the game of cricket. They decided, and also persuaded children, not to reveal this episode to anybody in their mohalla.

The boys' dreams were shattered and next day, they took an oath not to play cricket again. Lest the running commentary tempt them to play again, Lalji wrapped up his transistor radio with a piece of cloth and placed it under the heap of old books in a large wooden box in his home. And for a full year, no one from the Gang took the route alongside that bungalow, lest the baldy spots them and demands two rupees. This, inspite of the fact that they had to traverse a long distance around to reach thier school everyday.

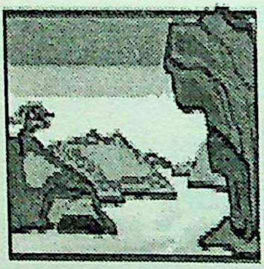
As far the boys' permanent spot under the tree, it remained an abandoned place thereafter, as the boys were scared to think of being sighted and 'arrested' by the baldy. Came winter and with that a heavy snowfall. But there was no snowman under the tree this time. Everything

around was frozen. The branches of the tree were hanging low, drops of water trickling down their leaves, perhaps mourning the disintegration of the 'Gang'.

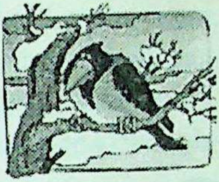
Charu & the Witch



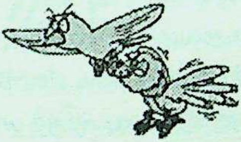
Long long ago, across the high snow peaked mountains, was a Village called Kolur. Kolur was situated at the foot of a small hill. A mountain stream 'Hapatara' flowed near by. Hapatara had knee-deep water during the summer months, which would generally freeze at the top during harsh cold winters. Stones and boulders in the Hapatara, covered with snow during winter, presented a frightful sight to the village children, who could not play in its waters like they would, during the Summer. Come rains, and this small stream would get transformed into a turbulent river, carrying with it, boulders, big and small, uprooted trees and logs of wood from the upper reaches. Elders in the Village believed that the flood waters also brought with it, evil spirits.

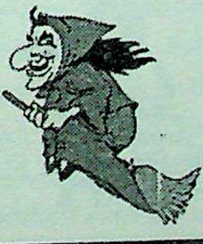


Kolur village was situated on the left bank of Hapatara, and most of it would get inundated during rains because of floods. There was no inhabitation on the other side of the stream. The bank on this side of



the stream was covered with thorny bushes, to provide a security barrier, to both the villagers and the cattle. Villagers would not venture on this side of the stream unless it was imperative. This area was a vast stretch of low-lying land, covered with wild vegetation and stagnant waters. Beyond it, was a very deep ravine and a high, snow peaked mountain called 'Vismainag'. Vismainag was densely covered with vegetation consisting of numerous herbs and poisonous plants. During the winter months, especially on the Amavasya night, people would hear heart ripping screams emanating from the Vismainag. Villagers would not dare to venture near this mountain, because many, who did in the past did not return back. Across Vismainag, they had heard from their forefathers, was a fort, which was inhabited by a witch. It was said that the witch had two long horns, and her eyes were flashing. It was believed, the witch would get hold of anyone coming that way and chant mantras to squeeze their souls out. The





souls were put into a glass jar and the dead bodies tied to the tall trees in her courtyard. Villagers believed that all these people would be resurrected by an angel, who would one day descend from the heavens.

There was no proof to support these myths and beliefs, but for some episodes reported by the villagers. Five years ago, a strange incident took place. The brown horse of a village elder, Samang, turned violent while looking at the mountain, and crossed over to that side of Hapatara, never to return back. Samang said he saw a white robed lady, almost five times the size of a normal human being, riding on the horse back and waving with her long outstretched arms, atop the mountain.

Yet, another tragic episode, corroborating the existence of a witch, took place: One day, in early spring, Charu and his friends Ketak and Gulu were playing hide and seek on the banks of Hapatara. During the course of play, Guloo hid himself behind a large boulder in the middle of the stream. Ketak and Charu, looked for him. Not finding him around on the bank, they quietly stepped into the waters

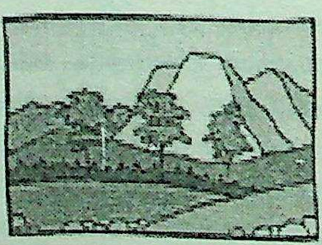
of Hapatara. A couple of boys, were enjoying the game while seating by the riverside. To their dismay, dark clouds moving across the Vismainag engulfed the Sun momentarily. A strong hailstorm followed, giving the boys no time to come out of the stream. Charu and Ketak held each other's hand firmly and managed to come out and take shelter under a big cliff. But Gulu was not to be seen. Charu and Ketak called out to him, at their best but to no avail. After some time, the sky cleared and it was bright and sunny once again, but Gulu was not around. Charu and Ketak went into the stream again, looked at all the possible hideouts, but there was no trace of Gulu.

The two friends, weeping bitterly, decided to return home and break the tragic news. On their way back they heard strange sounds from across the stream. They turned around to look and saw the water in the pond under a big tree, with serpentine like branches, splashing by itself. Terror stricken, they lied down on the sands and watched the scene. They first saw an out stretched arm rising out of the waters, then a giant sized

body, of a woman in white robes. She had Gulu tightly clutched in her left hand as she walked towards Vismainag. Gulu remained motionless, as if under a spell. Soon the woman was out of sight.

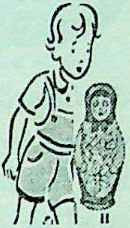
Charu and Ketak, terrified by the sight, ran homewards. They related the incident to one another, to make sure they were not daydreaming. Charu had noticed Gulu looking back while passing over the mountain but Ketak had not. Charu was sure, he had noticed two horns on the Witch's head and had also heard Gulu calling him for help.

Days passed by, yet, Charu could not help thinking about Gulu. What would the witch have done to him? Would she have taken out his soul and tied him to a tree? Or Would she have eaten him alive? These were some questions which sent a shiver down his spine. Ketak was not in his senses ever since that day. Village elders were helpless. No one dared to go to Vismainag and look out for Gulu. Even

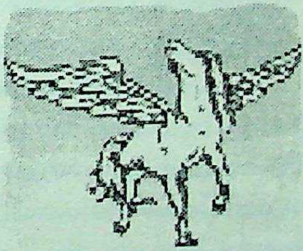


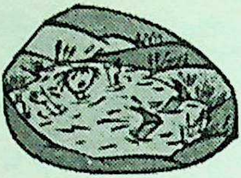
Gulu's parents were scared.

It was summer again. Charu was depressed. He went to Gulu's home to meet his parents. Gulu's parents were glad to see him, for, in him they saw a glimpse of their beloved son. They gave Charu, an earthen doll that belonged to Gulu as a token of their love. Charu showered a lot of love on the doll, as if it were Gulu himself. In a state of emotional turmoil he went near the stream and called out to his friend repeatedly. His calls echoed back. Exhausted, he fell asleep with the doll in his arms.

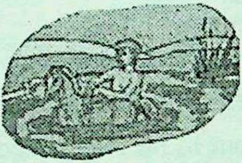


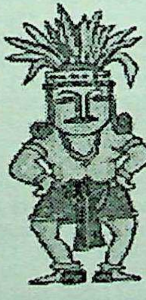
Charu dreamt, he was mounted on a horseback and flying in the air. He could see the village below. He flew over the jungles, over the snow capped mountains and rivers and over the dark and rainy clouds. As he looked below, he saw a number of small children playing in the waters of a lake. Water in the lake was clear and sky blue in colour. He descended a little and watched closely. He saw some children dragging a boy. The boy was trying to free himself from their hold but they would not let him go. They forced





him to dive into the water, but he managed to free himself. He ran and sat under a tree, wailing. The boy, with his watery eyes looked at the sky. Charu dismounted from his horse back and came closer to wailing boy. He looked up, murmured something and hung his head down. Charu asked him why he was wailing? The boy replied, "I have lost my friend while we were playing in the lake. Will you help me to find him?" Both of them then mounted the horseback. The horse entered into the waters of the lake and reached its bottom. They saw a small boy tied to a large shell, with an iron chain. His eyes were sore. He looked at them and screamed for help. The shell had to be broken into two to free the boy but they did not have the means. Before Charu could think, he heard a loud roar, the like of which he had never heard before. They saw a Rakshasa (Demon), sitting on a huge diamond throne, at some distance behind the shell. There were more than

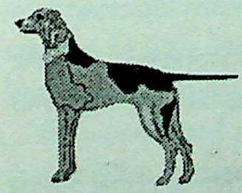




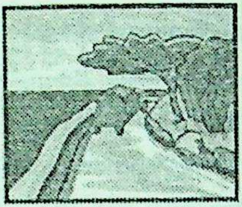
a dozen of demon servants serving him. The boys were scared. Rakshasa lifted his long magic wand and shot it at Charu. It came with a thundering sound, circling and swimming through the water. Charu bent his head and the wand hit the shell in the middle, which broke into two. The boy was freed but Charu fell down unconscious, as one of the pieces had hit him.

Charu woke up, and looked around. Finding himself still on the bank of Hapatara holding the earthen doll in his arms, he felt baffled. Was this a signal from the gods that Gulu was alive, and in trouble, needing help. That very moment Charu vowed that he would not rest till he found his friend and liberated him.

Charu needed help, but there was nobody who would and he did not have the flying horse either. Charu kept his calm. He did not reveal his dream to anyone. Of now his only mission was to rescue Gulu.



He collected as much information as possible about Vismainag, from people in the village. “What if I don’t have the horse! thought Charu, I still have my Tara, whom I can rely on”. He



carried his pet white dog, Tara to the banks of Hapatara, where they always played. He related the episode of Gulu's vanishing, to him. He repeated it a number of times, presuming that some day, Tara would understand and help him. On each occasion Tara would bark for a while, and then sit at Charu's feet and lick them, as if consoling him.

Charu's parents were very much worried about their son's condition. He would not eat or dress properly. Each time, he enquired about Vismainag, they would pray him not to think about that place. But they were sure, he was determined to find Gulu.

One sunny afternoon Charu and Tara were sitting at the bank of Hapatara. Tara, as usual, was licking Charu's feet. All of a sudden Tara stood up, looked at the pond across and dived into the Hapatara. He swam across, and ran towards the pond. He smelt its water, and raised his head high and barking loudly, disappeared into the bushes. Charu was shocked. Tara, his only hope was also lost. He wept bitterly.

Charu was fast asleep when he felt someone pulling

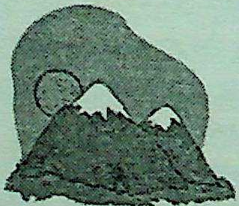
his leg. He was overjoyed to see Tara at his feet with an amulet in his mouth. This was Gulu's amulet. He took it into his hands and kissed it. Tara was looking at Charu's face. Charu patted him. Tara turned towards Vismainag and barked, as if telling his master that he had found the amulet there. Charu's joy knew no bounds, for, Tara had returned alive and that too with Gulu's amulet. Charu thought, time had come to sneak into the witch's domain.

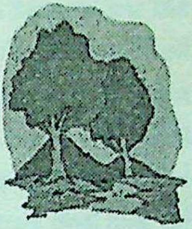
Next day, Charu met his friend Ketak and told him about his secret plans to rescue Gulu. Ketak thought, it was suicidal to even think of going to Vismainag. But he promised not to divulge Charu's plans to anyone. Charu decided to set out for the expedition on the Poornima, just 3 days away, for two reasons. One, he would get ample time to make necessary arrangements for the journey, and secondly, if he were late in reaching witch's fort, moonlight would help him trace the path.

Charu collected all, he thought was necessary for the expedition, in an animal-skin sack and hid it in the bushes in the backyard. He kept awake for the whole night, lest he may miss the opportune time of departure. Tara stood to accompany him.

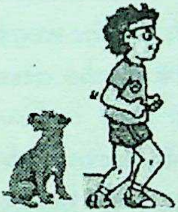
It was early dawn. Charu saw the first rays of sunlight, faintly illuminating the periphery of a big cloud, in the eastern horizon. He stood up and looked at his parents, who were fast asleep. "They would never know of me and my plans, if I do not return alive", thought Charu. In the heart of hearts, he felt sorry for them, prayed for their welfare and left silently. He collected his bag from the bushes and started towards his destination. Tara followed him. It was dawn when they crossed the Hapatara. They moved quickly so as to reach Vismainag as early as possible. Tara led the way.

Much before noon, they reached the deep ravine at the foot of Vismainag. Width at its banks was not much but, yet, one could not jump it. Going deep down the ravine and climbing up to the other bank, would take them most part of the day, as the slopes were very steep and they had no time. Charu looked around in dismay and to his surprise, there were two huge trees on either side





of the ravine. He had carried a rope along but how would he tie it to the tree across? Charu looked at Tara. Tara barked softly, as if telling his master that he was ready to perform any feat. Charu tied



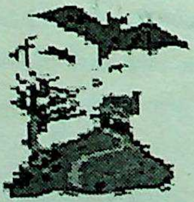
one end of the rope to the tree on this side and threw its other end across. He did not succeed in the first attempt and repeated the exercise again and again till he succeeded. As he looked down the ravine he saw Tara running fast, on his way down and then up to the bank, near the tree. Tara wound the rope around the tree as firmly as he could do.

Charu tied the bag around his back, held the rope with his hands and began moving across the ravine, while Tara kept a vigil. Slowly and steadily, Charu moved along the rope and finally reached to the bank across. His palms were bruised, causing him a lot of pain, but he was glad to have passed the first test.

After having rested for a while, he looked around to find out, how far was his destination. He could

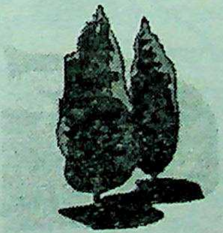
not see beyond a few trees. Charu had heard that the witches were capable of transforming creatures into other form. In order to avoid confusion he tore a piece of cloth from his shirt and tied it to Tara's limb. Tara then moved ahead, sniffing around, followed by Charu. Going up the hill was tough and the worry of being traced by the witch made it all the more tedious.

By midnoon, Charu was half way to the top. He decided to rest and so climbed on to a tall tree to avoid wild animals. Tara as usual kept guard. After have rested, Charu decided to continue his journey ahead. He was about to climb down when he heard Tara barking gently, looking up the tree. Charu heard some noises. He tried to listen very carefully but nothing was clearly audible. He kept his breath low and signaled Tara to hide himself in the bushes near by. In a moment, there was a strong wind blowing. All the trees started swaying. The wind was so strong that Charu felt he would be thrown off the brach any moment. He held the branch as firmly as he could. A passing cloud covered the sun. It was dark yet Charu could



see through the tall trees. He looked in the direction, of the sound and there at some distance behind the trees, he saw a white cloth swaying.The very next moment, he could see a long arm rising from behind the bushes, and then emerged a tall figure with apparently two horns over her head. In one of her hand, she clasped a white dog his ear and walked away towards the top of mountain. Charu was baffled. Was it Tara? This very thought drained out all his energy. He was startled when he heard mild bark below. He looked down and was glad to see Tara coming out of the bushes with the piece of cloth still tied to his leg. Dark cloud passed it was bright again. He climbed down and embraced Tara. Tara tugged at Charu's outer robe as if telling him that there was no time to waste.

Both Charu and Tara walked up the hill quickly. Charu did not stop on the way to either eat or rest. He was determined to reach the top before nightfall. He finally reached there by evening. On the other side of the mountain was a mild descent leading to a

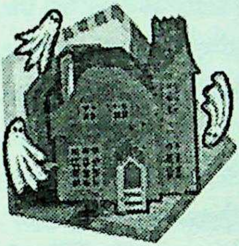


vast lush-green plain. But there were no birds around. Perhaps the wicked witch had eaten them all, thought Charu.

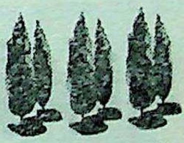
There was no trace of the witch, but Charu could see smoke emanating from a chimney at the farthest end. He looked carefully, when he saw a cave like structure, surrounded by trees. Charu was sure, this was the abode of the witch. He rested a while, ate some fruits after giving Tara his share, and then set again towards the cave.

Charu did not take the straight path but chose a steep descent onto a stream below, which he was sure, was Hapatara. He quenched his thirst first and so did Tara. Then Charu rested on a boulder while planning his next move. Tara was having fun meanwhile. Charu cautioned him for he feared the witch locating them. In the moonlight, they started moving in the direction of the cave, along the row of bushy trees, which had grown all along the right bank of Hapatara.

Charu moved forward cautiously, taking stock of the surroundings after every ten or fifteen steps, and keeping the smoke-emitting chimney constantly in sight.



By and by, he came close to the cave, which he could see very clearly now. His heart was beating at a faster pace. The cave was carved out of a big white rock. Its entrance was as big as the witch herself. At the mouth of the opening, there was a big stone, which was probably kept there to serve as a door. At the top of cave, there was a stone chimney, emitting gray smoke. The courtyard was planted with shallow trees all around, but there were no bodies. There was a channel of water, two or three steps wide, all around the courtyard. Water was splashing and emitting different colours, and its reflection on the courtyard trees provided a magical effect. The trees looked like ghosts, each tree having a different colour at different time. Two stuffed skeletons, may be of human beings, were kept across the channel to serve as a bridge. Charu felt as if he had no legs. He was exhausted now and the absence of bodies in the courtyard, as villagers believed, was a rude shock to him. Where could have the bodies gone? Had the



witch eaten up everybody? Tara was calm. He was not qualified enough to draw any plans. He watched Charu helplessly. Charu positioned himself within the wild bushes and so did Tara. Both kept vigil on the cave, which looked like a ghost's open mouth in the moonlight.

Some time passed. There was movement in the stone at the entrance. With a hissing sound, the stone moved to a side, and out came the witch in white robes. She pushed the stone back to original position and came into the courtyard. She raised her head and looked around as if counting her trees and then raised her hand high in the air. There was a howl from behind the chimney and an owl came flying to rest on her hand. This was perhaps a signal that everything outside was all right. Wicked witch smiled, took a step forward and released the owl, who flew back to his resting place. Witch took long steps, but this time, she did not go towards Vismainag. She took another route and in a few moments, she was out of sight. Charu keenly watched the cave, the courtyard, the trees and the channel. There were no signs of life and there were no dead bodies outside

the cave. "May be she has kept everything inside the cave", Charu thought. "What to do next and how to go in", he could not decide. He noticed, there was a small gap between the stone and the cave opening at the bottom, wherefrom, he thought, he could easily go in. He had already signalled Tara not to make any sound, because, he was sure, the owl was keeping watch of the area in absence of the witch. Charu knew that owls do sleep in the daytime only, but by that time, the witch would be back. So there was no chance to go inside. "Shall we have to wait endlessly?" Charu thought.

But they did not have to wait for a long. Wind started blowing hard, signaling return of the witch. In a moment, she was back with her frightening face and two long horns. She was holding an old woman by her hair. The woman was wailing and crying. Before entering the courtyard, the witch tied the woman to a tree near by. There was a spring near this tree, with crystal clear water, where the witch had a dip first. The moment, witch stepped into the water, it turned emerald green and

Charu heard musical sounds emanating from the spring. After some time, the witch came out of water, which turned crystal clear again. There were no musical sounds now. The witch untied the woman, caught her again by the hair and dragged her towards her courtyard. Charu was motionless, watching the scene curiously from his hideout. And what was it? Charu noticed, the old woman fell down as soon as she stepped on to the skeletons. She was dead now. The witch lifted her into her hands, passed the courtyard and pushed the entrance stone to a side. Charu saw her vanishing into the cave and the stone slipped to its original place.

Charu thought and thought again. "The witch did not have a dip in the spring when she left. Then why did she have it on her return". He could not solve the puzzle. He did not know when she would leave again for another prey. And if she left during daytime, would the owl really be asleep. He thought he would have to wait a long. But no, it was not to be. The witch came out immediately, raised her head and looked around at the trees. She then raised her hand high in the air. For a moment, there was no howling. Her face turned most frightful. She turned towards

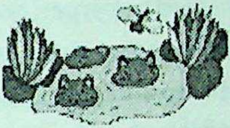
the chimney and clapped forcefully. There was a strange sound in the air and a howl, and the owl came flying from behind the chimney, onto the witch's hand. For a while, the owl fanned his wings as if praying to be forgiven for the lapse. The witch smiled, presumably condoning his lapse, took a step forward and released the owl again, who flew back to his resting place. The witch left, this time towards Vismainag. Charu was disturbed. He did not consider the lapse on part of the owl incidental. He was sure, the owl had some inkling of his presence in the vicinity, but may be, he was not sure enough to convey it to his mistress. Charu was sure, owl had no permission to leave the spot where he was placed except flying into his master's raised hand when she left. Otherwise, he would have definitely searched them out. Charu had also heard that the soul of all witches was always secured in the heart of a bird. And to kill a witch, it was necessary to kill the bird. "So, was the owl also holding witch's soul inside him?", Charu could not decide. This time he was highly disturbed because he had seen the witch going towards Vismainag and was sure, someone from

his village would fall prey to her tonight.

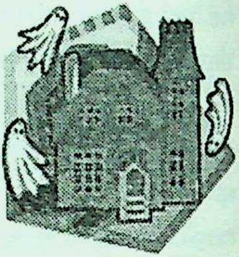
The wind blew again. Charu knew, the witch was coming back, and so she did. But this time she did not hold anybody. She was alone. May be there was nobody, not even an animal on this side of the Hapatara. Charu was relieved. Then, whatever happened, was the most important event for him. The witch, before going into her cave, had again a dip in the spring. And Charu thought, he had got the password to enter witch's domain. He was relaxed. He got his food and fruits out of the sack and had a good meal along with Tara.

Next morning, as the sun rose, Charu awoke. He had to be more cautious this time, because it was daytime and everything was so clear and visible from a long distance. He thought of the owl and looked at the chimney. There was no owl there. He must have been asleep by now. Charu was waiting for the witch to go out. He had to wait for a long. At about noon, the witch left again. And Charu was glad, because

he had thought right. There was no howl and no owl this time. She stopped on the skeletons across channel and looked into the magical waters. Water stopped splashing and there were no magical colours now. She observed something in the water and waved her head. Then she left for her unknown destination. Water started splashing again with magical colours. Charu thought, this could be the witch's alternative way of ascertaining the situation outside, in absence of the owl.

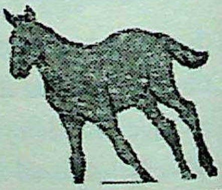


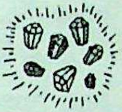
Charu gathered his wits. He was fully prepared now. There was no owl to watch him. He went to the spring and hesitatingly stepped into its waters. Anything could happen but Charu was ready to face all. And it was a surprise. The colour of water changed and there were musical sounds. Charu had a dip and so had Tara. Before Charu could decide the strategy to pass the water channel, Tara made a fast dive right into the courtyard, and he was all alive. Nothing happened to him. Charu was joyful. He followed Tara and both of them reached the



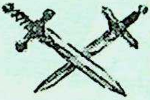
entrance of the cave. Tara did not have to move the stone. Instead he peeped first through the opening at the bottom of the entrance. He could not see anything because inside, it was complete dark. He pushed himself in and also dragged in his sack. He asked Tara to be there. Tara understood. He had to keep guard and inform his master as soon as wind started blowing.

Charu tried to look into the darkness. He saw a staircase going down. He came down the steps and saw a big area, carved out of the rock, with massive stone pillars. From one hole in the roof, some light was coming and Charu had to wide open his eyes to look around. There, all along the periphery, were bodies of human being, kept in the standing posture. He touched the bodies one by one. There was no sign of life in them. On one side, were heaps of bones, which Charu was sure, were of those whom the witch had eaten up. He got panicky for Gulu. He continued to look for him till he found him in a corner along with the bodies of some other children. Samang's brown horse

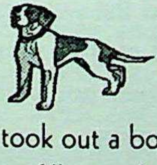




was also there, standing on four legs but motionless. There were precious stones and jewellery placed on shelf like structures. There were swords and arrows, made out of large animal bones. There were all varieties of fresh and dry fruits and other eatables, stored in beautiful gem laden stone containers. Charu's time was running out. He quickly looked out for the glass jar containing souls, but there was none. There was a wall at another corner. Charu went behind it and found another small cave, in which fire was lit. He took a burning wood and searched each and every corner of the cave, but he could not find any souls. He got worried. He came out of the cave. Tara was alert, standing near the stone. There was no trace of a wind and Charu still had time. But he could not decide about his next move.

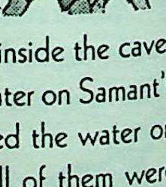


Charu noticed, Tara was wet. He had taken another dip at the spring. Charu was angry. Tara should not have left the spot he was stationed at. He rebuked Tara and Tara licked his feet, begging pardon. In a flash, Charu felt, he had had some clue to rescue Gulu. He took out a bowl from his sack and went to the spring to fill it with water. He did not forget to have an-

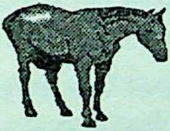


other dip before he entered the courtyard again.

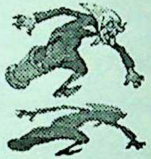
Tara kept the bowl on ground and climbed up a tree. From there, he looked at the chimney. The owl was fast asleep there. Charu climbed down immediately, picked his bowl and went inside cave again. He reached near Gulu and poured the spring water over him. Gulu started moving his eyes and lifting his hand. Charu shouted with joy. Within moments, Gulu was alive. He embraced Charu and kissed him. Tara heard their voice and came running inside. He licked Gulu's feet. Gulu patted him. Charu and Gulu wanted to leave immediately but Tara would not let them go. He was looking at the brown horse of Samant. Charu understood what Tara wanted. Charu and Gulu, both came out. Tara remained there. Charu emptied his sack and filled it with spring water. Both of them had a dip, and carried the sack inside the cave. With his small bowl, Charu poured water on Samant's horse. He was also alive. They poured the water on as many people as they could and all of them were alive. Time was running out and they could not waste time on getting more water from the spring.



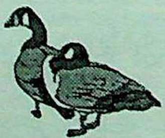
The brown horse and the people who got life back, jointly slided the entrance stone. All of them were out of the cave. Charu instructed all to run to safety before the witch came or the owl awoke. And an idea struck Charu's mind. The owl was sleeping and It was the right time to kill him. He signalled Tara. Tara ascended to the top of the cave and down brought the owl, his wings tightly held in his teeth. Owl was half asleep, fluttering his wings. Tara dropped him near Charu and Charu lifted him in his hands and twisted his neck. There was a thundering roar all around. Charu continued twisting owl's neck and the wind started blowing. The witch was somewhere near, roaring with pain. Wind blew faster and the witch came close to the spring, shouting and screaming. The owl was still alive and Tara was not able to kill him. He put him under the foot of the brown horse, and the horse trampled it. There was a loud scream of both, the owl and the witch. The witch fell near the spring half dead, screaming and pleading for life but the horse was mad. He did not look at witch and instead kept the owl pressed under his foot. Tara, jumped over the owl and tore his neck apart



with his sharp teeth. The owl and the witch died instantly. And a miracle took place. There was no spring now. It vanished. The magical water channel was calm now. There was no splashing and there were no colours. The skeleton bridge also vanished.



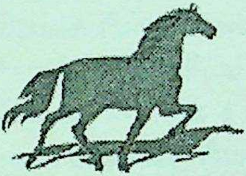
Charu and Gulu, both were sad. Those, dead inside could not be given life now, as there was no spring and no magical water. Before they started leaving for their home, they heard noise inside the cave. And in a few moments, all those who were still dead inside, came out alive, running and shouting, to the pleasure of Charu. They had all attained life at the death of the witch.

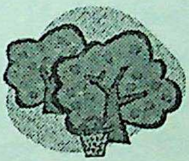


When Charu and Gulu reached top of Vismainag, they saw flocks of different varieties of birds coming towards plains of the cave. They saw nightingales and bulbuls and parrots and long necked swans, all chirping and singing, and retiring at the fruit bearing trees. The whole area looked like a piece of paradise. But Charu and Gulu and Tara and the horse, did not want to stay in this paradise. They wanted to be home before it was night. Tara ran fast

and fast so that he could inform the villagers in advance.

Charu and Gulu mounted on Samant's horse. When they reached foot of the Vismainag, there was no ravine. The banks had joined back. The trees were there and the rope was lost inside the earth. Beyond this place, the land had grown with lots of flowery plants. There were no wild bushes and the whole area looked beautiful.

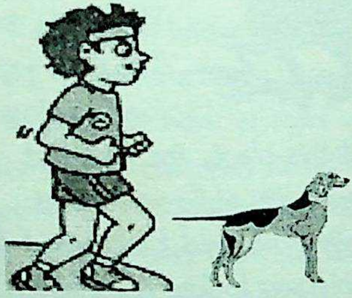




When Charu and Gulu reached Kolur, all the villagers had assembled at both the banks of Hapatara. All of them shouted with joy and embraced both Charu and Gulu. Charu had done a great job at the risk of his life and was now the hero of the village. Charu's parents were in tears of joy, having seen their son alive. Tara was carelessly swimming and playing in the waters of the stream.

Next day, villagers removed the thorny bushes barrier from right bank of Hapatara and declared that area open to all. They changed the name of the

snow-capped mountain from Vismainag to Charunag, in the name of their hero.



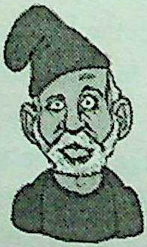
Three Questions

Thousands of years ago, there was a kingly state in Bharatvarsha, called Batsala. Arunagiri was its capital. Maharaja Abhayadhiraj was the king of Batsala. He was a noble and pious man. Maharani Vasundhara was his queen. She was very beautiful. Maharaja had won her in a *swayamvara* from among a dozen competitors . He had fought and killed a bison bare handed in the *swayamvara*. People of Batsala were very happy with the king and the queen. They would always pray for their long life.

For a long time after their marriage, Maharani Vasundhara did not bear any child. Medical advice was sought from the royal physicians but to no avail. Rituals were performed in order to appease the deities at the instance of learned Brahmins, but they were of no consequence. Maharani Vasundhara was desperate. Maharaja, though himself very upset, consoled her saying that it was probably the wish of gods. Still they prayed fervently for a child, successor to the throne.

It was early Spring. Maharaja and Maharani were

taking a stroll along the stream flowing by the side of the Rajmahal. Mahamantri Sura was following them at a distance. Maharaja heard some noises coming from the gate of the Rajmahal. He asked Sura to look into the matter. On reaching the gate, Mahamantri found the royal guards questioning an old man. The old man was requesting them to permit him to meet the king but the guards were not relenting. Mahamantri asked him who he was and why he wanted to meet the king. Old man said that he had come from a distant place only to meet the Maharaja and reveal a secret to him. Convinced that the old man had something important to reveal, Mahamantri let him in and promised him an audience with the king.



Maharaja Abhayadhiraj was informed about the old man's request. He issued instructions that the visitor be immediately brought to the Durbar. He also asked his Mahamantri and other ministers to be present.

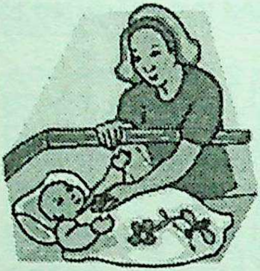
The old man was escorted by the chief of royal guards. He saluted the Maharaja in the customary manner. Maharaja welcomed him and asked him who he was and why did he want to meet him? The old man, introduced himself as Joginda, a yogi. He said, he hailed from a distant place and that he wanted to make some revelations.

Yogi Joginda continued, "I have been meeting the people who visit your country off and on and through them, I learned about your nobility and generosity. I always desired to meet you but was waiting for an opportune time. When I heard that you have no child to succeed your throne, I was pained. I decided to invoke the blessings of Lord Brahma through *Tapasya*. At the conclusion of my *Tapasya*, Lord Brahma appeared in my dream. He directed me to perform a 100 days uninterrupted *Yagna*, to grant me a wish, which I did. Now I have come here to tell you that Maharani Vasundhara will soon be blessed with a male child."

Cries of joy rented the air. Maharaja and Maharani were thrilled at this revelation. Maharaja directed his Mahamantri to arrange free meals for a hundred Brahmins. He gifted Joginda precious gems and requested him to stay on as royal guest for a week. Maharaja personally looked after his comforts. Yogi Joginda was moved at the Maharaja's hospitality.

While departing from the palace, he said, "I shall come again to bless the child."

In due course of time, Maharani Vasundhara gave birth to a beautiful male child. Rajmahal was illuminated and a free *langar* was arranged for the poor for three days. Sweets were distributed among the friends and Rajmahal staff. A special emissary was sent to yogi Joginda to inform him about birth of the child.



On his arrival at Rajmahal, Joginda performed puja along with Maharaja Abhayadhiraj. He blessed the child and named him 'Arisudhana'. Joginda told the king and the queen, "Rajkumar Arisudhana should be crowned as successor to the throne only when he attains the age of twenty. At the age of fifteen, he should be sent outside the territory of Batsala in the garb of an ordinary person to seek answers to the following three questions:

1) In what lies one's lasting pleasure?
2) What is that which a woman loves most?
3) What is that which one can not hide for long?

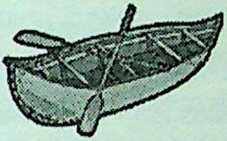
Rajkumar should be given a maximum period of five year's to seek the answers. He should be crowned as successor to the throne only if he gets all the answers right".

"And how do we know that he got the correct answers", asked Maharaja. Joginda took a piece of *bhojpatra*, wrote something on it and wrapped it in a piece of cloth. He made it into an amulet and handed it to the king. "Correct answers are written here. It should be opened only after the Rajkumar returns with the answers." Saying this, the yogi left. Maharaja secured the amulet in the treasury vaults and relaxed. His successor was before him. He had nothing to worry about, he thought. Rajkumar would definitely come up to his expectations and get the right answers.

Rajkumar Arisudhana was brought up with lot of love and care. As he grew up, his parents told him about the yogi and his three questions. Rajkumar wanted to leave immediately but Maharaja and Maharani did not permit him as he had not attained the age of fifteen.

On the day of his 15th birthday, Rajkumar Arisudhana rose early in the morning. He was given a ceremonious bath. He then performed puja in the royal temple along with his parents. A grand Durbar was organised on the occasion. He was seated on a rosewood pedestal in the centre of the Durbar Hall while Rajguru chanted mantras from the holy scriptures. *Tilak* was applied on his forehead. He was then dressed in white robes like that of a common man. Maharani offered him sweets and a glass of milk. Maharaja and Maharani, both garlanded him. A pouch containing fresh and dry fruits, *saamgri* for performing puja, *Gangajal* and an additional set of clothes, was placed on his shoulder. He was now set to leave the palace. Maharaja, Maharani, Mahamantri and Rajguru accompanied him. At the palace gate, two decorated horse driven carriages were waiting. Maharaja, Maharani and Rajkumar got seated in one and Mahamantri, Rajguru and others in the second. These carriages drove them towards river Surbhi. People of Arunagiri thronged both sides of the road leading to Surbhi. They were raising slogans and praying for safe return of the Rajkumar. On reaching the river bank, they all alighted from the carriages. Maharaja and Maharani embraced

Arisudhana and then led him to a boat decorated with flowers. Arisudhana took the oar in his hands and waved to his parents and the people. Maharaja and Maharani stood motionless, tears trickling down their eyes. They watched their prince rowing away till he was out of their sight.



Next morning, as the Sun sent its first rays into the palace, Maharani woke up. As usual, she paid obeisance to the rising Sun. Arunagiri, the capital of her kingdom Batsala, was so located as to receive the Sun's rays first. But this morning was different from other mornings. Rajkumar Arisudhana's absence was being felt everywhere. Maharaja gathered courage or at least put a brave face but Maharani was deeply distressed. She could not hide her grief.

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Rajkumar Arisudhana reached the outskirts of his kingdom in the afternoon. He tied his boat to a tree, threw away all flowers and garlands into the river, lest some one recognise him. He set on foot towards an unknown destination. While on his way, he came across a big shady tree and decided to take

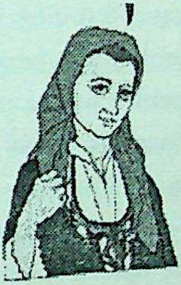
rest before proceeding further. He hung his pouch on a branch and laid down. He soon fell asleep.

When Rajkumar woke up, it was almost dusk. He noticed a stranger sitting beside him. The stranger asked him who he was? In order to keep his identity hidden he said, "I am Ananta. I hail from Batsala. I have set forth for the world outside my country in search of a livelihood. Who are you and what is this village called as?" The stranger said, "I am Anusuya. This village is 'Rudraloka'. I hail from a village called 'Chandri'. It is a day's journey from this place. I plan to spend the night in a temple nearby and leave for my village early morning. You can accompany me if you so wish." Rajkumar Arisudhana, who was now Ananta, nodded in agreement. They reached the temple after a short walk. Both of them had some fruits and milk for dinner and decided to rest for the night.

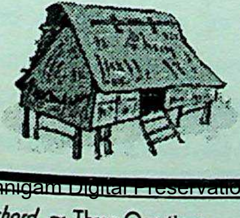
Next morning, after taking a bath and performing puja in the temple, they left for Chandri village. On the way Ananta noticed, Anusuya was not as old as he appeared the previous night. He was prob-

ably middle aged, good looking, though lean. During their journey, they ate whatever Ananta carried in his pouch. They reached the village late in the evening. Anusuya asked Ananta, "Where do you go now? You must be very tired. Why don't you spend the night with me and leave for your destination tomorrow?" Ananta readily agreed.

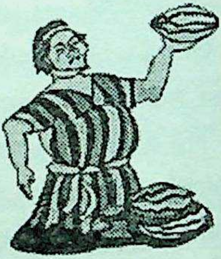
On reaching his home, a small hut made of bamboo and hay, Anusuya called out to his wife. A young lady appeared at the door. Anusuya introduced her as Pushpalata, his wife and informed her that Ananta would be staying with them for the night. Ananta observed that the place, though clean, clearly reflected the poverty of its owner. Pushpalata, soon brought a bucket of hot water and washed their feet. She then served them a good meal. After dinner Ananta stretched himself on the floor and soon fell asleep.



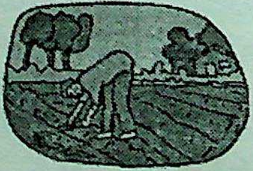
On waking up next morning, Ananta did not find Anusuya around. He enquired with Pushpalata. She told him that Anusuya had left for the fields at dawn. She also told him that she had prepared flour



cakes and soup for Anusuya, which she was going to deliver to him. Ananta thought he could give some relief to Pushpalata. So he volunteered to carry the food for Anusuya, to which Pushpalata agreed. She added some more cakes and soup for Ananta.



Anusuya was ploughing the land. He had only one ox and in place of the other, he had put himself. He was perspiring profusely. Looking at Anusuya's pathetic condition, Ananta thought to himself as to what could be the cause of Anusuya's extreme poverty? He became curious . He wanted to know more about Anusuya and help him. On seeing Ananta, Anusuya stopped and retired to a green patch. Both of them opened the pack and had the soup and the cakes. While they were having their lunch, Ananta broached upon the subject. Anusuya, finding a sympathetic friend, began narrating his life story.



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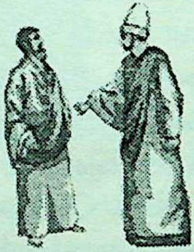
Anusuya revealed that he was not always a poor man, but hailed from a well to do family. His father

Chalaka was a pious man and helped the needy. His mother was an orthodox lady, shrewdly dedicated to her religion. She would seldom venture out of her house. The family had a large chunk of land which was enough to feed them throughout the year. They also had a good house to live in. At the age of twenty, Anusuya was married to Pushpalata. They were a happy family.

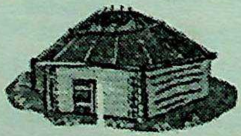
Chalaka, had a cousin by name Taraka. He was a man of vices and had lost everything on drinking and gambling. He had to even sell off his land. Chalaka, tried to correct him many a times but to no avail. When Taraka turned a pauper, he got jealous of Chalaka. Chalaka having no inkling of Taraka's jealousy, wanted to help him. He gave him a small piece of land in charity and advised him to reform himself. Taraka accepted the offer but requested that the land be transferred through a proper deal. He said he was particularly suspicious of Pushpalata rescinding the offer after Chalaka was no more. Chalaka agreed and asked Taraka to get the transfer documented. Taraka got the documents and Chalaka put his seal on them. Taraka however did not take possession of the land immediately, stating that he was waiting for

an auspicious time.

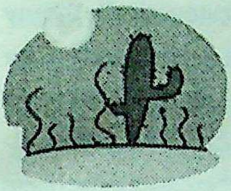
As ill-luck would have it, Anusuya's father and mother met a fatal accident while on a pilgrimage. The news came as a shock to all the villagers, for whom they were next to God. Entire village mourned their death. But there was one man who rejoiced on their death. And he was Taraka.



After a couple of days, Taraka approached the still mourning Anusuya and Pushpalata and asked them to surrender their land and house to him. He showed them the papers bearing Chalaka's seal. He claimed that the property had been sold by his father to him. Anusuya and Pushpalata were taken aback. They were sure the papers were fraudulently obtained. They complained to the village elders, but they could not help. Papers clearly proved Taraka's claim.



Anusuya and Pushpalata vacated the house. They erected a small hut in the corner of a vast area of barren land a little away from the village. This land also belonged to them and luckily was not included by Taraka in his deed. They moved into the hut along with their four year old son.



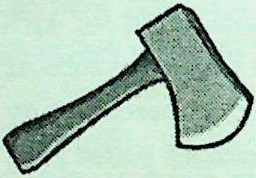
Anusuya and Pushpalata had to start their life afresh. The land they owned now, was slopy and the river water could not reach it. Having no option, Anusuya decided to cultivate a small portion of land with such crops needing scanty rainfall. He worked hard and gradually started earning a meagre livelihood.

A good house had always been Pushpalata's dream. She did not mourn the loss of land as much as she mourned the loss of her house. Anusuya knew it. He promised to give her a new house but did not succeed. He had nobody to help him. And the Raingod did not seem to favour him either.

* * *

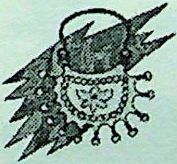
Ananta was moved with Anusuya's pathetic story. He decided to help him. So when Anusuya asked him if he could work with him in his fields, Ananta agreed immediately. He had no specific destination. He thought it was better to start looking for the answers right from here. And who knew, God only brought him to that place to know the truth?

Anusuya and Ananta first removed all thorny bushes and stones from the entire barren land. They then levelled it in terraces. It took them almost three months. At the extreme elevation, there was a big hump of stone conglomerate. They started breaking the hump with whatever means they had. After days of toil, when they were about to finish the job, a miracle occurred. Ananta's axe struck the bed of the conglomerate with a bang. A crevice was formed and water came gushing out through it, in the form of a spring. Anusuya and Ananta, both cried out with joy. Water flowed down with force, flooding the entire land below. Anusuya ran home to tell Pushpalata about the miracle. Ananta sat on a stone nearby, watching the water meandering its way all through the land. On reaching the site, Pushpalata could not believe her eyes. She fell at Ananta's feet in gratitude. Ananta had brought them good luck.



With their sheer will, Anusuya and Ananta transformed the whole area into a beautiful cascade of fields. These fields became the prize land of the village now, because of the high

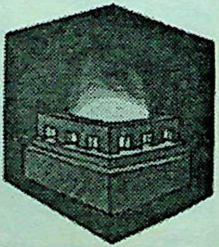
yielding spring. In six months' time, the duo's hard work bore fruit. The fields were full of golden crop which fetched Anusuya a very good sum. Second harvest earned him much more than his expectations. He then started constructing his new house. In a short span of time, Anusuya was well settled. Pushpalata was very happy, for, she had a good house now. Ananta was also happy working for Anusuya.



In due course of time, Anusuya earned a fortune. Pushpalata was fond of jewellery. She told her husband that she wished to buy a jewel-studded necklace for herself. Anusuya bought her a necklace, studded with gems, which was unique piece. Pushpalata wore it around her neck. She was all smiles, her desire fulfilled. She did not part with it even for a moment. Now the necklace was more dear to her than any thing else.

Ananta thought, he found an answer to one of his question: 'What is that which a woman loves most?' And the answer was certainly 'Her Jewellery'. He was now planning to leave the village, but Anusuya did not allow him. He wanted Ananta to stay for some time more. Ananta agreed.

A few days passed. Anusuya and Pushpalata visited a fair in the neighbouring town. Ananta stayed back to look after the child. There were hundreds of well decorated stalls at the fair, selling items brought from distant places. There were cattle shows and a variety of entertainment programmes held under colourful *Shamianas*. Anusuya and Pushpalata went inside a *Shamiana* to witness a magic show. Suddenly, during the course of the show, the shamiana caught fire. There was a chaos. People were running helter-skelter for safety. There were cries and screams, some falling down and others trampling them. Anusuya caught his wife by her hand and almost dragged her. In the confusion, Pushpalata's necklace slipped down. Pushpalata jerked out her hand from that of



Anusuya's and turned back in search of the necklace. Anusuya persuaded her not to bother for the necklace and instead run for safety. But she would not listen. She managed to get her hands on the necklace but as soon as she turned around, a burning wooden structure collapsed and fell on her. Anusuya could only hear her groan. He ran towards her and with the help of a few people, he managed to get her out. Her face was badly burnt but the necklace was still tightly clinched in her hand.

Anusuya summoned the best *hakeems* and *vaids*, to treat Pushpalata. They did their best but could not restore back her original beauty. Pushpalata was desperate. One of the hakeems advised them to seek help from a *Tantrik* at a far off place, who, he claimed, had magical powers and was known to have treated many such cases. Anusuya summoned him.

The *Tantrik* had a look at Pushpalata's face. He assured to restore her face, but demanded a sum beyond Anusuya's means. Even by selling his house, he would not make the requisite amount. So Pushpalata decided to offer her necklace. "Beauty is more valuable than the stones", she concluded. And the necklace changed hands.

True to his word, the Tantrik performed miracle. Pushpalata's beautiful face was restored. No one could now say that she had ever burnt her face. Anusuya and Ananta could not believe their eyes. Ananta had to revise the answer to his question. In his opinion now, a woman loved her beauty most. And this time, he was doubly sure, he had the right answer.

Ananta got ready to leave for his next destination. Anusuya, Pushpalata and their child had returned to the old hut. Ananta was sure, Anusuya would rise again. He promised Anusuya that on his return, he would visit them.

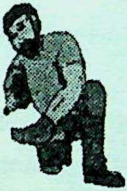
⁂

Ananta set out for a new unknown destination. He had to make his way through mountains and jungles. He came across a group of shepherds. They informed him of a town named Saraspur on other side of the mountain. It took Ananta three days to reach this town, while on his way, he spent his nights with the shepherds.

Saraspur was a beautiful town. It was located on the bank of river Saraswati. Ananta reached there at

noon. He went to the river and had a bath. He saw a number of Brahmins performing religious rites at the *ghat*. Ananta watched them for a while and then retreated to a nearby temple.

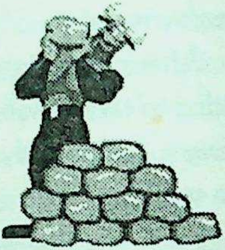
After performing puja in the temple, Ananta decided to take a walk down the market. He was very hungry, but nobody would feed him for free. While on stroll, he saw a middle aged man dressing stones.



The man was totally engrossed in his work. Ananta observed that there were a number of stone blocks on one side and a few carved stones on the other side. Ananta went up to him and introduced himself. He then enquired if he could get a job as he was badly in need of one. The stone carver whose name was Mihira, was alone and had a lot of work in hand. He readily offered him one. On knowing that Ananta was hungry, Mihira offered him food from his stock.

Mihira's job was to dress and carve stones. These stones were used for constructing houses. intricately carved stones were also used in construction of temples. Mihira's stones were very much in demand because of their finish. But he was unable to cope with the demand. He had employed a few people initially but they left one by one because of strenuous nature of work. Mihira was however contented with his earning and lived happily with his wife.

Ananta picked up the job very fast. Mihira was pleased with his work. On seeing Ananta doing a good job, more and more people joined them. In a short span of time, Mihira became a big supplier of carved stones. His stones were now in demand in other villages and towns. His business began to flourish.

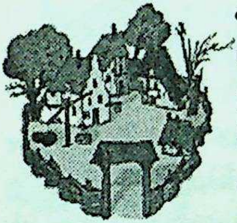


Mihira's lust for wealth grew. When he was alone, he would hardly carve one stone a day. After Ananta joined him, the number rose to three a day. Now he had half a dozen workers and the number of stones carved each day was more than a dozen. Yet he was not satisfied.

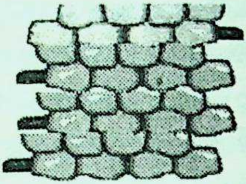
Ananta observed, Mihira was getting tense day after day. When alone, Mihira was contended with earning two square meals. After that, when he got enough to live a respectable life, he started yearning for a cow, a pair of oxen and good house, like that of his cousin. Now he had all this and more, yet he was not satisfied. He revealed his desire to equal Lochana, the town head-priest, to Ananta.

A year later, Mihira became the richest man of his town. He had not to work himself now. He had scores of workers to do the job. He had two horse carriages, while Lochana had only one. But he continued to look tense. He had enough of wealth but no contentment.

Mihira heard from traders, the tales of a rich man across the river Saraswati. His name was Kalpaka. He had two palatial houses for his two wives. Kalpaka also had ten cows, half a dozen of horses, five pairs of oxen and tens of servants.



Mihira's lust knew no bounds. He now wanted to equal Kalpaka. The spring season ahead would pave the way to fulfill his dream. A grand temple in the name of goddess Saraswati was to be constructed on the bank of river. People from all villages and towns in the vicinity had joined hands for this purpose. Mihira was the only one to supply stones, as he was nearest and the best. He employed hundreds of workers and started the job well in advance. He also shifted his place of work to the open ground near the site of temple.



By the end of season, thousands of stone blocks stood carved and stacked at the temple premises. People were all praise for Mihira and Ananta. By the time, construction of temple got underway, Mihira became so rich as to leave Kalpaka way behind. He married two more women and constructed three palatial houses near the temple, one for each of his wives. He was a happy man now.

Ananta was delighted. He was now ready with an answer to his first question: 'In what lies one's lasting pleasure?' He was sure, one's ultimate pleasure was in having enough of riches.

Ananta bid good-bye to Mihira. Mihira was reluctant to let him go, for, he was sure, he could make more riches with his help. But Ananta did not agree. More than four years of his five year term had already elapsed. He was yet to seek answer to the third question. So he wished him good luck and promised to see him again on his return.

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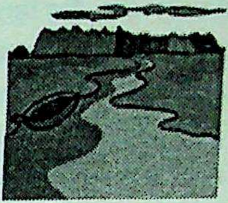

Ananta had heard a lot about river Ganga and the learned people living on its banks. He decided to spend some time there to seek knowledge and look for an answer to his third question. He met some people on his way. They were headed for Kashi, the most sacred place on the banks of Ganga. Ananta joined them.

In a couple of days, Ananta reached Kashi. One of the persons accompanying him, introduced him to Guru Vasudeva, a highly learned Brahmin of Kashi. On learning that Ananta had come from a far off place to seek knowledge, Vasudeva welcomed him into his Ashram.

Guru Vasudeva's Ashram was home to many a boys. All of them came from well-to-do families and most of them were from very far off places. While in Ashram, they received lessons on various subjects ranging from spirituality to high values of morality. Reading the religious scriptures, vedas and puranans, also formed a part of their daily routine.

Besides this, the boys had to perform daily chores of the Ashram. Ananta, who had acquired some agricultural skills at Anusuya's place, was asked to work in the fields.

Ashram life was a new experience to Ananta. Every job was done in accordance with a fixed schedule.. There was perfect coordination between the inmates of the ashram. Guruji's discourses were enlightening. He loved all his disciples alike. Ananta realised, he was fortunate to have come to that place.

One day while in the fields, Ananta saw a boy, sitting alone at the periphery. The boy looked very gloomy. On enquiry from other inmates, Ananta learned that the boy's name was Gautama. His father Narsimha, had been taken into custody by the king of Kashi. No further details were known, nor was anybody allowed to discuss the issue. Ananta could not resist. He requested Guruji to tell him about Gautama. Guruji did not reply.

Each day Ananta observed, Gautama would sit at a particular spot facing the entrance, perhaps waiting for his father. Ananta could not see his plight. He once again requested Guruji to tell him about Gautama. Guru Vasudeva looked into Ananta's eyes. He found in them, a deep desire to know the truth. Guruji could no longer hold back the truth. So he narrated Narsimha's story to him.

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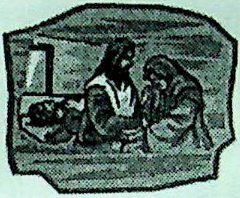
Narsimha hailed from a country named Sadhra, which was located to the South of Kashi. He was a young boy when his father, Abhinava died. Abhinava was a renowned Raj-jyotshi of Sadhra. Narsimha had acquired *jyotish-vidya* from his father, right from his childhood. Actually, this knowledge passed from generation to generation in their family and there was nobody to compete with them. On the death of Abhinava, Narsimha was designated as the new Raj-jyotshi by the king of Sadhra. He was to take charge and shift to Rajmahal only after proving himself worth that honour, by making at least two correct predictions. Till that time, Narsimha was to spend his days in his village.

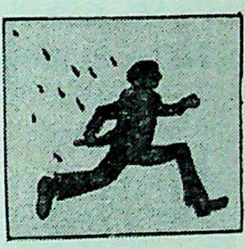
The king was a staunch believer in astrological fallouts. So Raj-jyotshi enjoyed a special status in his palace. Narsimha was sure, he would go well with his duties and earn good name for himself like his father. He was only waiting for an opportune time to make a prediction.

But luck did not favour Narsimha. One day in the morning, he was informed that the queen had delivered a baby girl. He was informed the time of birth of the child and asked to predict her future. Narsimha was excited. The time had finally come to make his first prediction. He was about to begin his calculations when someone knocked at his door. Narsimha opened the door and saw a fellow villager Sehdeva. Sehdeva told him that his wife had delivered a baby and requested him to predict the child's future. Narsimha took necessary details from him. Sehdeva left. After a detailed study, Narsimha's calculations revealed that the baby born to the queen would earn laurels, while the one born to the villager would die the same day. He sent his predictions to respective parents through a messenger.

The king and the queen were overwhelmed with joy on reading Narsimha's prediction. The news travelled through length and breadth of the kingdom in no time. A great *raj-bhog* was ordered to be ar-



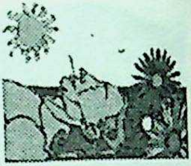
ranged. Just before the Sunset, when the merry making was at its peak, news came of the death of the baby. There was commotion. The King and the Queen were shocked. Guests began leaving the palace wailing. Food cooked for guests was thrown away. Lights were blown off and the palace was drowned into complete darkness.



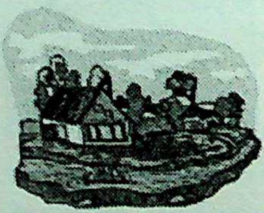
News reached Narsimha. King was furious with him for his wrong prediction. Narsimha was scared, knowing well that he would be hanged. He decided to leave immediately to save his life. He covered his face with a scarf and walked as fast as he could to get out of his country. On the way he heard people talking about the wrong prediction and the punishment to follow. It was midnight when he found himself safe, far away from his country and its people.

Narsimha kept walking all through the night, treading difficult terrains, valleys and ridges. In the morning, he found himself in Kashi. He took a dip in the river Ganga and slept on its sands.

Narsimha did not know for how long he had been



sleeping. But when he woke up, he saw a crowd gathered around him. They wanted to know who he was and where from had he come. Narsimha did not want to reveal his identity. He was sure, the king would send his men in search of him. He introduced himself as Murlidharan. He told them that he hailed from a distant place and had come to Kashi to seek knowledge. People guided him to Vasudeva's Ashram.



To keep his identity completely hidden, Narsimha, who was now named Murlidharan, told Vasudeva that though he was an illiterate, he had come all the way to Kashi to seek knowledge. Vasudeva was very kind to him. He admitted him into the Ashram. Guru also imparted necessary education to him, to enable him understand vedas. He was assigned duty in the *Bhojanalaya*.

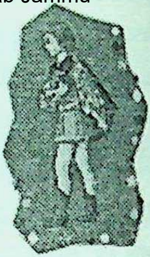
For five long years, Murlidharan lived in the Ashram. He wished to marry now and lead a family life. He expressed his desire to Guru Vasudeva. Vasudeva conceded but did not permit him to quit his duty at the Ashram. With the blessings of Guru

Vasudeva, he married Rohini, the daughter of a poor Brahmin of Kashi and lived in a small hut nearby.

Murlidharan did not reveal his identity even to his wife, Rohini. Both of them were happy. In due course of time, Rohini gave birth to a lovely boy. The boy was named Gautama.

Gautama was born with great talents. He was very sharp in all respects and had a natural flair for astrology. This surprised Guru Vasudeva. He enquired from Murlidharan if there was ever an astrologer in his family? Murlidharan denied and the matter ended there.

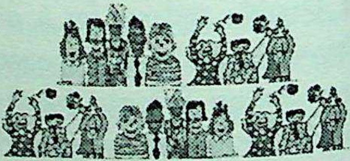
One day, the king of Kashi decided to renounce the kingship and set for a pilgrimage to Kailash Mansarovar, along with his queen. So he planned to crown his son Rajkumar Varun as the king. He fixed an auspicious day and time for Rajkumar's coronation as per the advice of his Rajguru. The ceremony was to be held in an open ground, big enough to accommodate the entire population of



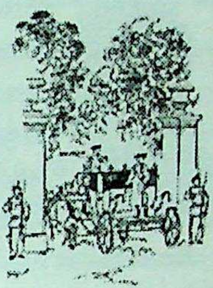
Kashi. A massive Pandal was erected on the ground for the coronation. Preparations for the ceremony started well in advance.

Murlidharan learned about day, date and time of the coronation ceremony. The astrologer within him awoke. He became suspicious about the time. Something was wrong, he felt. He started studying the *grahas* prevailing at the time of the ceremony. His suspicion was not unfounded. The time fixed for Varun's coronation was the most inauspicious one. He had no doubt now, but was not in a position to pronounce the truth. He tried to keep his calm though he was highly disturbed.

On the day of coronation, he accompanied Guru Vasudeva to the place, where ceremony was to be held. They occupied their seats in the front row. Ground was over flowing with people. The royal family was yet to arrive.

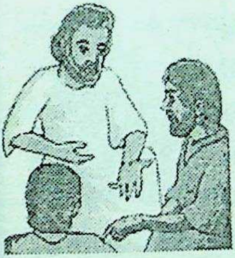


The king, queen and the prince arrived in a royal carriage. All of them ascended on to the dais spe-



cially erected for the purpose. People shouted *jayjaykar* in praise of the king, the queen and the prince. The Mahamantri gave details of the ceremony.

The jyotshi in Murlidharan, kept pricking his conscience. He was in a fix. Time was running out. He could not decide what to do? In the anxious state of mind, he unknowingly pressed Vasudeva's hand. Vasudeva turned to him. Murlidharan was sweating profusely.



Guru felt, Murlidharan wanted to say something but was not able to speak. He patted him gently and asked him to speak out. Murlidharan revealed that the time chosen for the coronation was most inauspicious as per his calculations. Guru Vasudeva was perplexed. How could the illiterate Murlidharan make astrological calculations? Murlidharan pleaded with him to convey his message to the king. Guru Vasudeva was in a fix. He could not decide what to do? On Murlidharan's insistence, he decided to present him before the king.

Before the Raj-jyotshi could stand up to announce

commencement of the coronation ceremony, Vasudeva got up and climbed on to the dais. He requested the king to grant Murlidharan an audience immediately. Having high regards for Guru Vasudeva, the king agreed.

Murlidharan was still sweating. He requested the King to postpone the ceremony as the time was very inauspicious. On hearing this, the King and the Raj-jyotshi were taken aback. Raj-jyotshi refuted Murlidharan's claim. The King was confused. He asked Murlidharan, " Who are you and on what basis do you refute our Raj-jyotshi's calculations." Murlidharan replied, " Your Majesty! My real name is Narsimha. I cannot tell you anything more about myself now. But I stand by my prediction. The time calculated by your Raj-jyotshi is most inauspicious. Coronation of Rajkumar Varun at this time, will be disastrous." "But how do we believe your words?" asked the Mahamantri. Narsimha said, "A little before the designated time, Sun will be completely eclipsed. The country will be engulfed into complete darkness. There will be no light for quite some time. If this happens, my prediction should be taken as correct". "And if it

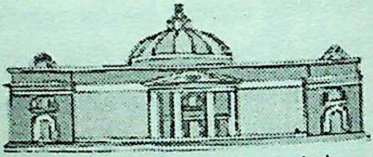
does not happen?", asked the King. "In that case I offer my head", replied Narsimha. The King announced, "Let our Raj-jyotshi keep everything ready for the ceremony. If the Sun is eclipsed, the ceremony will automatically stand postponed. And if it does not happen, the coronation will proceed as per programme and Narsimha shall be beheaded immediately after the ceremony."

King's decision was hailed by everybody. Narsimha was held captive by the guards. Guru Vasudeva was standing beside him. He was feeling pity for poor Narsimha. "How can Narsimha make such a prediction and prove the Raj-jyotshi wrong", thought he. He was sure Narsimha would face death.

But things happened exactly as Narsimha had predicted. Soon, the Sun was completely eclipsed. There was complete darkness. Nothing around was visible. The king and the queen and all others were terrified. The crowd stood mesmerised. This phenomenon lasted a few minutes. Immediately, after the Sun shone again, the king stood up and embraced Narsimha. Vasudeva was glad but confused.

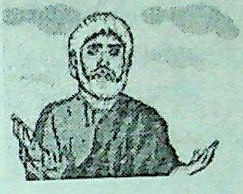
Raj-jyotshi has vanished from the dais to escape ensuing punishment. Narsimha was designated as the new Raj-jyotshi. He was asked to present himself in the Raj Bhawan next day, for a formal ceremony.

Vasudeva and Narsimha returned to the Ashram. Vasudeva was still in shock. He could not make out as to how an illiterate person could make such an accurate prediction. He did not ask Narsimha any questions. Instead he decided to put the truth before the King.



The following day, Vasudeva accompanied Narsimha to the Raj Mahal. Before the formal ceremony, Vasudeva approached the king and said, "Your Majesty! I am greatly pleased to have my dear Narsimha appointed as Raj-jyotshi. But before this is done, It is my duty to tell you some facts about him. Narsimha has been with me for the last fifteen years. He is illiterate and does not know a word about astrology. How could he work out the exact happening, is still a mystery to me? If he really is an astrologer, then why did he lie? Ashram is a sacred place for bringing up the most noble breed of children. How can one lie while seeking admission to such a place. If Narsimha is proved to have lied, I request your majesty to give him a befitting punishment."

The king looked at Narsimha and asked him to divulge the truth. Narsimha stood with his head low and eyes filled with tears. He said, "Yes, Your Majesty! I am a liar. I deserve to be punished. But I would like to reveal the circumstances which compelled me to hide the truth."



Narsimha then narrated his story to the king. At the end, Narsimha said, "I had to lie out of compulsion. Had I not lied, I would have been caught by my king and punished. I am however still surprised, how could my prediction go wrong in his case?"

The king did not pronounce his judgement. He ordered that Narsimha be kept in custody till a final decision was taken.

* * *

"That was Narsimha's story", Guru Vasudeva concluded. He said to Ananta, "The king will take a decision soon. I am myself in pain, to see Narsimha in custody. But I am helpless. Lying is a sin and in an

Ashram, it is the biggest sin."

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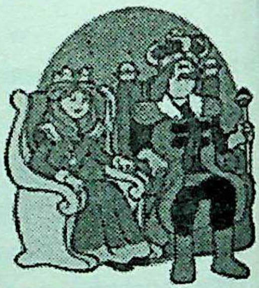
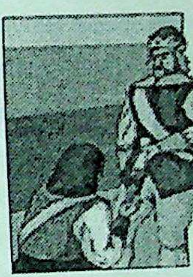
When the king ordered Narsimha's custody, he was not sure of the facts. He could not understand as to why Narsimha's prediction had gone wrong. He counselled with his aides, but there was no way to exonerate him.



One day, the king discussed the issue with the queen. She was also worried for Narsimha. After all, he had saved them from a disaster. She thought for a while and said, "Why don't we call the villager Sehdeva, whose wife had also delivered a baby that day". "What can he do", asked the king. "I think the answer lies there only", replied the queen.

The king sent an emissary to Narsimha's village to fetch Sehdeva. When he came, the queen asked him if he knew the astrologer Narsimha? Sehdeva was sore with that name. He told the queen, "I don't want to talk about him. He made a wrong prediction. He said that my child would die the same day. My daughter is very much alive. She has read all Vedas and has become an epithet of knowledge."

The queen got the answer. Narsimha was really a great astrologer. She told the king, "It is evident that the timing of the birth of two babies were messed up. So horoscopes also changed hands. One meant for the king was delivered to Sehdeva and that meant for Sehdeva was given to the king. There was nothing wrong with the predictions.



The king was delighted. Narsimha was released and brought before the king. He was accorded a warm reception by all. Guru Vasudeva was called to the palace. He was relieved after learning the truth. He sent a message for Narsimha's wife Rohini, his son Gautama and Ananta. On the same day, Narsimha was formally appointed as Raj-jyotshi. He touched the feet of the king, the queen and Guru Vasudeva in reverence.

⁂

Ananta got the answer to his third question: What is that which one can not hide for long? And the answer was 'One's roots'.

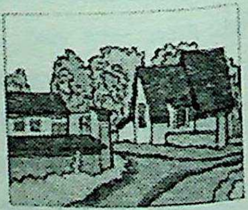
Ananta had answers for all the three questions now. His mission was complete but he still had some time left at his disposal. He desired to seek more knowledge from Guru Vasudeva. So he decided to stay back in the Ashram.

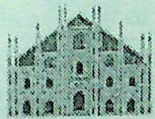
In less than one year's time, Ananta read and memorised all vedas and other religious scriptures. He also got acquainted with the codes and customs concerning worldly affairs. He now sought Guru Vasudeva's permission to leave. Guru, with a heavy heart allowed him to go. All boys of the Ashram were grieved. And so was Gautama, who had found a good companion in Ananta. But Ananta had no option.

While on his way back, Ananta thought, "Did I not commit a sin by not revealing my identity to Guru Vasudeva?" He decided to seek its answer from his Rajguru on reaching his palace.

***

Ananta was back in Saraspur. It was almost a year after he had left Mihira. When he reached the palatial house of Mihira, he was shocked to find that the house now belonged to Kalpaka, the rich man who lived across Saraswati.





Ananta enquired from the *dwarpal* who was previously in Mihira's employment, as to how did the house transfer to the new master. Dwarpal replied, "Mihira became very greedy. In his thirst for more riches, he challenged Kalpaka to a game of dice. Kalpaka accepted the challenge. Mihira lost the first game and with that some riches. Kalpaka wanted him to withdraw. But Mihira insisted on continuing with the game. In the hope of winning back, he kept on playing game after game till he lost everything. His wives abandoned him when he turned a pauper. "And where is Mihira", asked Ananta. "He has started afresh, carving stones at his old place", replied *dwarpal*.

Ananta went to the river bank to meet Mihira. He found Mihira engrossed in carving a block of stone. Mihira did not see Ananta till he came very close. Mihira looked up and greeted Ananta with a radiant and smiling face. Ananta had never before seen such a smile on his face. Ananta sat down. But even before he could speak, Mihira said, "Look, don't ask me any questions. I have come a long way since you met me first. I craved for riches and I was able to achieve all that I wanted. But there was no contentment. At every step, I felt inferior to yet another rich man. I wanted to be the wealthiest. My first wife, who had supported me all through the bad phase of my life, left me. I am sure, even if I had succeeded in getting all of Kalpaka's wealth, I would not have been satisfied. I have realised there is no end to this lust. It is only the contentment that brings lasting pleasure". Ananta then corrected his answer to the first question: 'One's lasting pleasure does not lie in riches. It lies in one's contentment.'

Mihira requested Ananta to stay with him for a day, not as his worker, but as a friend. Ananta stayed back and tasted the delicious food cooked by Mihira.

Ananta left Saraspur next morning. He had a fortnight before his time limit of five years would elapse. He felt sure that his answers to the three questions were correct. On his way to Arunagiri, he had to fulfill his promise of visiting Anusuya at Chandri.

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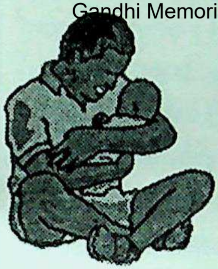
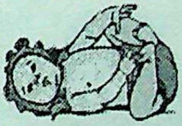
When Ananta reached Chandri, he was shocked to see Anusuya in a pitiable condition. His son had



contracted an illness which was unheard of in the region. His legs were first paralysed, then his arms and in about a year's time, his entire body was affected. All treatment given to him had failed. The child lay motionless on the floor. Anusuya had spent all his wealth and had also sold off his land for treatment of the child. Someone suggested that the *Tantrik* who had earlier cured Pushpalata, be called. But Anusuya felt helpless as he had nothing left to pay the tantrik.

Ananta was in a shocked state of mind. He could not bear to see Anusuya and Pushpalata in agony. He wanted to console them and so he stayed with them.

With each passing day, child's condition worsened. One morning they found that the child had lost his sight. Pushpalata screamed in anguish and threw her body at the feet of her house deity. Ananta became restless. He could not bear to see Anusuya and Pushpalata in such a pitiable state. He sent for the *Tantrik*.

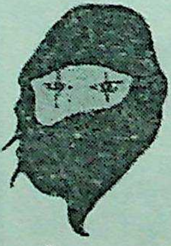


Tantrik came and examined the child. He was

confident that he could cure the child in a day. But he would not be able to restore his vision. Ananta asked him his fee, and also if there was a possibility of restoring the child's eyesight? Tantrik asked for a hefty sum as his fees. Ananta promised to pay him the fee only after the child was cured of paralysis. The Tantrik informed told him that the child's vision could be restored only if someone donated his eyes. "But who would donate his eyes", thought Ananta.

Tantrik went ahead with the treatment. By Sunset, the child had completely recovered from the paralysis. But he had no vision. Pushpalata embraced her child.

As soon as the Tantrik stood up to leave, Pushpalata in a very calm and composed manner caught him by his hand. With a strange smile on her face, she looked directly into the Tantrik's eyes and said, "You can't leave before you carve out my eyes and restore my child's sight." And the Tantrik did it.

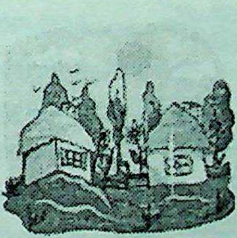


Ananta requested the Tantrik to stay for the night, so that they could leave together for Arunagiri next

morning, where he would pay him his fee. "How and wherefrom are you going to pay me," asked the Tantrik. Ananta was silent. He could not reveal the facts. The Tantrik got suspicious. He shut his eyes and meditated.

After a while, he opened his eyes and fell at Ananta's feet. Anusuya looked puzzled. He did not know what was going on. The Tantrik disclosed that Ananta, was actually Rajkumar Arisudhana of Batsala. Both Anusuya and Pushpalata were stunned at the revelation. Tantrik said to Rajkumar Arisudhana, "I will not accept any fee from you. You are the son of the most noble king on earth. It was my guru Joginda, who performed *Tapasya* and *Yagna* to bring you into this world." Anusuya and Pushpalata touched Rajkumar Arisudhana's feet in reverence. Tantrik continued, "I will be pleased to send the message of your return to Maharaja Abhayadhiraj through my tantrik powers." After saying this, the Tantrik left.

Rajkumar Arisudhana left for his kingdom next morning.



It was the last but one day of his five year limit. He was eager to reach Arunagiri. He took Anusuya, Pushpalata and their son along. They had to go a long way, first up to village Rudraloka and then rowing along the river Surbhi, to Arunagiri.

⁂

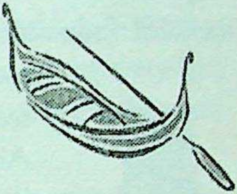
Maharaja Abhayadhiraj was very perturbed, for, he had no news about Rajkumar. There was only one day left now for the five year term to end. Maharaja thought that his wish to crown his son as his successor, would probably not materialised. Maharani was very upset. She was longing to see her son, with or without answers. Both of them went to bed with a heavy heart.

Maharaja Abhayadhiraj saw Rajkumar Arisudhana in his dream, telling him that he would reach Arunagiri next morning. Maharaja woke up and told Maharani about the dream. Her joy knew no bounds. The Tantrik had done his duty of informing them about Rajkumar's return. Maharaja immediately called for the Mahamantri,

Rajguru and others and told them to make grand preparations for receiving Rajkumar Arisudhana at the Surbhi banks.

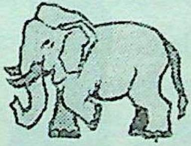
* * *

On reaching Arunagiri in his boat, Ananta found Maharaja, Maharani, Mahamantri and all other dignitaries waiting impatiently at the Surbhi bank, with garlands in their hands. There was a sea of people behind them. A specially decorated elephant was there to carry Rajkumar.



People shouted slogans with joy, "*Rajkumar Arisudhana Ki Jai*". Maharaja and Maharani had tears of joy in their eyes. They embraced and garlanded their son. Others followed.

Rajkumar Arisudhana was seated on the elephant. Maharaja & Maharani got onto their royal carriage. Rajkumar had Anusuya, Pushpalata and their son seated on another carriage along with Mahamantri. They then set towards Rajmahal.



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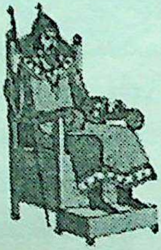
Rajguru was waiting with flowers. and *tilak* at the Palace Gate. He welcomed Rajkumar Arisudhana and

applied *tilak* on his forehead. He escorted Rajkumar to Durbar Hall, where he was scheduled to answer the three questions in presence of all.

People had assembled in the courtyard of the Rajmahal. Rajkumar Arisudhana was given a royal bath and a royal robe before he took his seat in the Hall next to Maharaja Abhayadhiraj. Anusuya and his family also joined the Durbar. Maharaja asked his Mahamantri to proceed with the formalities. Mahamantri welcomed the public and then stated the purpose of holding Durbar. He requested Rajguru to pronounce the questions one by one to enable Rajkumar to answer them. There was pin-drop silence all around.



Rajguru pronounced the first question: 'What is that which a woman loves most?' Rajkumar Arisudhana shut his eyes for a while. Then he looked at the blind Pushpalata and answered, "A woman loves her child the most."

Naturally. Rajkumar had changed his answer to this

question. When Pushpalata donated her eyes, she knew very well that she would not be able to see the world thereafter. She also knew that her beauty, which she loved most and which she had restored by selling her house and the precious necklace, will mean nothing without eyes. Still she sacrificed everything for her child. This made it amply clear that her child was her ultimate love.

Rajguru pronounced the second question: 'In what lies one's lasting pleasure?'

Rajkumar answered: "One's lasting pleasure lies in one's contentment".

Mihira was not a bad man. Being ambitious is not sin. In fact ambitions lead to progress but one has to be contented with one's lot at a certain stage. Mihira had lost contentment. His ambition to be the wealthiest man turned him greedy and in the process, he lost everything.

Rajguru pronounced the third question: 'What is that which one can not hide for long?

Rajkumar replied: "One's Roots".

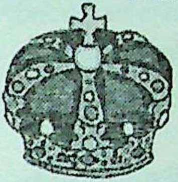
Narsimha knew very well that his prediction could get him into trouble, but he

could not resist telling a fact. The astrologer in him did not allow him to keep quiet. He was sure his prediction was based on authentic calculations and he was correct. So even at the cost of his life, he could not hide from the world, the facts, much less his roots.

Maharaja Abhayadhiraj directed his Mahamantri to bring him the amulet given by yogi Joginda. The amulet was opened. Maharaja and Rajguru checked the answers with those given by Rajkumar. Maharaja was highly delighted and so were others. Rajguru announced that the answers were correct. People shouted *jayjaykar* for Rajkumar Arisudhana.

Next day, as the Sun rose high in the sky, Rajkumar Arisudhana was crowned as the rightful successor to the throne of Batsala. There was illumination throughout Arunagiri. Rajkumar got Anusuya appointed as a *Mantri* in the Durbar, much to the delight of Pushpalata, who enjoyed the function through the eyes

of her son. In the midst of public, Maharaja Abhayadhiraj spotted an old man, who was watching the proceedings calmly. It was yogi Joginda. Maharaja, without caring for the royal protocol, went personally up to him and embraced him. He brought him to the ceremonial dais where he was welcomed with garlands. Maharaja introduced him to Rajkumar Arisudhana. Rajkumar touched his feet. Joginda was all praise for the prince. He blessed him and prayed for his long life. Maharaja gifted him a pearl necklace.



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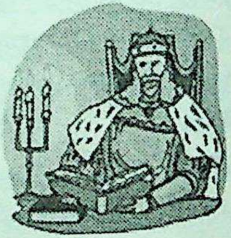
There was one question which still bothered Rajkumar Arisudhana. Did he not commit a sin by not revealing his identity to Guru Vasudeva? He had thought to put this question to Rajguru, but since yogi Joginda was present in the Rajmahal, he deemed it proper to put the question to him. Next day, after narrating the whole story of Guru Vasudeva and Narsimha to yogi Joginda, Rajkumar put the question to him. Joginda replied, "No. You have not committed any sin. You were asked to remain in the garb of an ordinary person and not to reveal your identity, while seeking the answers.

You have merely complied with that condition. Moreover you did not hide your identity to cause any harm to anybody or to escape a punishment." Rajkumar Arisudhana was relieved to hear Joginda's reply and so were all others.

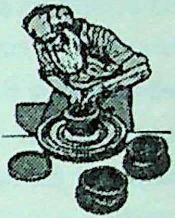
* * *

Five years later, Maharaja Abhayadhiraj and Maharani Vasundhara decided to relinquish the throne in favour of their son. So Rajkumar Arisudhana became the king of Batsala at the young age of twenty-five. At the age of thirty, he extended his rule to other regions which included Rudraloka, Chandri, and Saraspur. He treated all his subjects with love and care and provided them a justly rule. People were also proud of him.



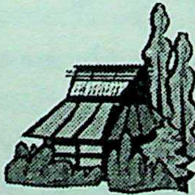
And Maharaja Arisudhana came to be known for his wisdom and justice throughout Bharatvarsha. Anusuya, who was appointed his Mahamantri, proved his credentials by his wise counselling and guidance to the king all through his life.

Kaal Chakra

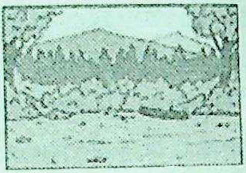


Long long ago, at the foot of Himalayas across river Sarada, there was a village called Manjihara. There lived a poor potter and his wife named Harihar and Chandrawati. They had a son Vansraj, but he was no more living with them. After his marriage with Devakala, Vansraj had shifted to his in-laws place leaving his parents to fend for themselves. Devakala was the only child of her wealthy parents. After their death, Devakala inherited all their wealth and property. Devakala and Vansraj lived a luxurious life, while Harihar and Chandrawati made a hard living by making earthen dolls and pots.

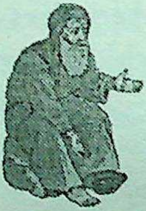
Harihar and Chandrawati had no grouse against their son. Though they were deeply hurt by his action, they took it as their fate. Harihar had a small house to live in, which he inherited from his father. He also had a younger brother named Harbhajan. Harihar had brought



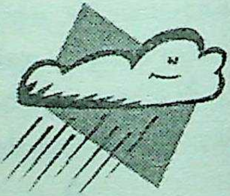
him up after their parents' death, but Harbhajan turned a vagabond. He decamped with Harihar's savings, whatever little was left with him, immediately after Vansraj deserted his parents. It was believed that Harbhajan had gone to other side of the mountains for better prospects, though his exact whereabouts were not known.



One day, when Harihar and his wife were about to have their morning meals, a beggar came that way. He asked for some food. Beggar looked famished and Harihar immediately offered him his plate of food. The beggar voraciously ate the food and prayed for Harihar's prosperity. Harihar only smiled. He knew, there was nothing in his fate to cheer about.

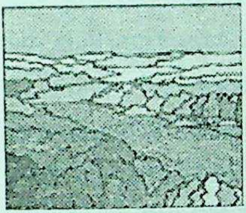


Next day, it rained heavily throughout the day forcing Harihar to stay indoors. Harihar had exhausted his stock of potter's earth. He needed to get fresh stock but the best stuff was available only across the river Sarada. "It would not be possible to cross the river as the water must have risen due to heavy rains", Harihar thought. He had no choice but to



wait.

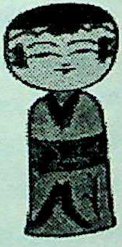
Harihar waited impatiently. He had received an order for one dozen earthen dolls and had to deliver them to the client next day. Rains stopped late in the evening. Harihar and Chandrawati left with an empty sack, a shovel and a flaming torch. On reaching the river, they found the water level very high. It was not possible to cross the river. They dug out the earth, though of an inferior quality, from a near by spot. On reaching home, Harihar got started with his work while Chandrawati lit the *chulha* to cook food.



The client came to collect his order next day. He carefully inspected the dolls and rejected one of them, finding some defect with its eyes. Harihar did not argue. He had himself observed the defect, but every time he took the doll in his hands to correct the defect, its eyes looked perfectly well. This was a mystery for Harihar. He placed the doll in a corner.

Harihar & Chandrawati were fast asleep, when Chandrawati woke up hearing wails of a child. She lit the lamp and looked around. There was no one except the two of them in the room. Assuming it as her imagination, she put out the lamp and went to bed again. Next night, Chandrawati heard the wails again. She was scared. She woke up her husband and told him about it. Harihar looked around but there was none. He pacified Chandrawati, assuming that she must have had a bad dream.

As soon as they put out the lamp, Harihar himself heard the cries. He was terrified. He lit the lamp once again and was amazed to find the wailing sounds emanating from the doll placed in the corner of the room. He took a close look. Tears were rolling down the doll's eyes. Harihar and Chandrawati were about to flee, when they heard a voice saying, "Please don't leave me alone. I am Vishu. Please listen to me." Harihar and Chandrawati, though horror-stricken, came closer. Voice from the doll continued, "I hail from village Rundhwa. Long time ago, I was kidnapped by my step-brother Kaliprasad and murdered at the river bank. He did this to grab my property. He consigned my body to flames at the spot from where you dug out the earth. My death was untimely, so my soul kept wandering in that area.

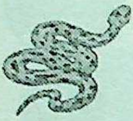


When you carried the earth containing my ashes, I followed you. I then decided to take refuge in one of the dolls that you moulded from the earth. You can bring me back to life if you so wish. And if you do so, I promise to serve you all through my life".

Harihar and Chandrawati were dumb struck. Gathering his composure, Harihar thought for a while and replied, "I am willing to do as you like, but how can I be sure that you don't harm us on gaining life". Vishu in the form of the doll replied, "I shall be like your son. How can I harm my parents? Moreover, I will live only if two of you do not reveal my real identity to anyone on your own. And if you do so, my soul will escape leaving behind my dead body." Perplexed Chandrawati enquired, "What if you talk of taking revenge from your step-brother?" Vishu replied, "Once I am resurrected, I shall forget my past. So there is no question of taking revenge."

Harihar and Chandrawati counselled with each other. They felt that they needed a son who would look after them in their old age. "Hence", they thought, "It would be wise to resurrect Vishu back to life." Harihar asked Vishu, "How

do we bring you back to life?' Vishu replied, "On the fifth day of the lunar fortnight, you shall have to ascend to the top of Mount Viji. There, you will find a temple of Naagdevta. It has a spring located in its backyard. The Naagdevta's image in the temple is to be given a ceremonial bath with the water collected in a *Kamandal* from this spring. Part of the water flowing down the image must be collected back and used for bathing me. But you have to make sure that all this is done before the sunrise. This process has to be repeated for three days. On the third day after the bath, you will cover me with the leaves of the banyan tree and leave me alone till the full moon rises in the sky."

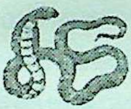


The task was arduous and Harihar had a number of doubts. "Would I be able to do as desired by Vishu and that too within the desired time limit?" He was confused and asked Vishu "What if the job is not accomplished in three consecutive days?" Vishu replied, "You may do it up to tenth day of the lunar fortnight, but not more than that". And before Harihar could ask any more questions, doll's eyes became stationary.

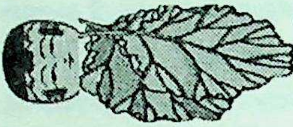
Harihar had only two days to make preparations.

On one hand, he was not sure of the turn of events after Vishu's resurrection. On the other, he fancied a child playing in his lap and serving him and his wife when he grew up. Harihar and Chandrawati decided to make an attempt and charted out their further course of action.

On the appointed day, he set out from his home just past midnight. He walked as fast as he could and reached top of Mount Viji a couple of hours before dawn. On reaching there, he located the temple and the spring. As desired by Vishu, he collected water from the spring in a *Kamandal* and gave a ceremonial bath to Naagdevta's image in the temple. Collecting part of the water flowing down the image, he set towards his home. Going down the hill was not difficult but he had to take care not to spill the water from his *Kamandal*. He reached home a little before sunrise. His wife was eagerly waiting outside. Both of them bathed Vishu - the doll, with the water.

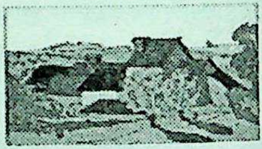


Harihar and Chandrawati repeated this process for the next two days. On the third day, they placed the doll in a corner and covered it with banyan leaves. Satisfied that they had successfully accomplished their



job, they left the room. To ensure that no one entered the room, they locked it from outside. They now had to wait till the full moon night.

To ascertain the veracity of Vishu's story, Harihar decided to go to the village Rundhwa, donned as a potter to sell his goods. It took him a full day to reach Rundhwa. On reaching the village he could find accommodation in the house of Satyadev, the village-head. Satyadev had a grown up daughter Rajlakshmi living with him. Rajlakshmi had lost her mother immediately after her birth, and was brought up by her grandmother, who too did not live long. Satyadev could not find a match for his daughter, though she was well past marriageable age. People thought she was carrying misfortune on her head.

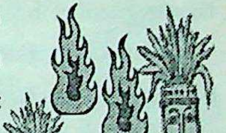


Rajlakshmi treated Harihar with respect. Harihar, as he heard her story from Satyadev, felt very sorry for her. He could not believe that an innocent

girl could be treated this way by her own villagers. But there was little he could do about it.

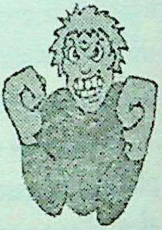
Harihar began gathering information about Vishu and his stepbrother Kaliprasad from Satyadev and other villagers in a manner that nobody got suspicious. Harihar was astonished to know that Vishu had suddenly disappeared from the village twenty years back. No one knew where he went and why? Kaliprasad then took control of all his property and lived with great pomp and show. "But this pomp and show of Kaliprasad lasted only a few years when a strange incident took place", Harihar was told.

Satyadev related to harihar, the incident that took place on Dussehra a couple of years after disappearance of Vishu. On this day, in accordance with the tradition, the effigies of Ravana, Kumbhkarna and Meghanatha were being consigned to flames in the open ground. All the villagers including the elite had assembled to watch this ceremonial burning of the effigies. As soon as the effigy of Ravana was lit, Kaliprasad who was sitting with other elite members of the village in the first row,



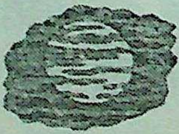
suddenly jumped up and shouted "Vishu is burning, save him". He frantically tried to douse the flames with his hands. "Ever since", Satyadev told Harihar, "He is suffering from hysteria and is in a very pathetic condition. He has a long unkept beard, dirty clothes on his body and keeps wandering from place to place calling out to Vishu". Harihar listened with keen interest.

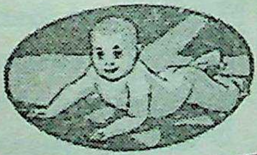
Next day, while on his usual round of investigation, Harihar happened to see Kaliprasad. He found Kaliprasad in a dishevelled state, continuously muttering, "Did you see my Vishu? He lives there in the skies". Harihar felt sorry for him.



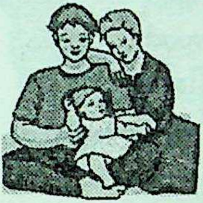
Having ascertained the truthfulness of Vishu's statement, Harihar returned to his village.

On 15th of the lunar fortnight, when the full moon appeared in the sky, Harihar and Chandrawati lit a lamp and unlocked the room. Intrinsic euphoria writ large on their face, they proceeded towards the corner. Removing the leaves one by one, they began uncovering the doll's face. Lo and behold! A sweet little child with a mesmerizing smile looked at

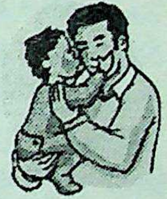




them. Excited, Harihar could not believe his eyes. He came closer and held the child in his arms.



Chandrawati stood as if in a trance. She took the baby in her arms and fondled it. With the birth of the baby, their joy knew no bounds. In order to keep Vishu's resurrection a secret, Harihar and Chandrawati concocted a story. When the neighbours enquired about Vishu, Harihar told them that he found Vishu at the Naagdevta's temple. Villagers readily accepted this story. They felt that it was God's boon to Harihar and his wife, who were living all alone and had no one to look after them.



Birth of Vishu gave a new lease of life to Harihar and Chandrawati. They forgot all their pains and miseries and were totally involved in the upbringing of their child.

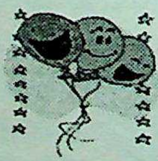
As Vishu grew up, he helped his parents in their professional work and also with the household chores. This gave lot of relief to his old parents. Their income was also augmented and they were a happier lot now.

During his free time, Vishu would go around the village, enquiring about well being of the villagers. If he found anyone in trouble, he would render help in

every possible way. He would fetch water from the stream for the old women and play with the young ones. He helped them in cutting and collecting firewood and repairing of their thatched roofs. These gestures made him the darling of the villagers.

As the years passed, Harihar became a rich person. He was elected head of the village and came to be known for his wisdom. People from other villages often visited him to seek his counsel and advice.

It was a tradition for the villagers to hold a fair every year at the banks of river Sarada. Boys and girls of marriageable age from all the neighbouring villages would gather on a specified day and select their partners from amongst the contenders. Vishu had turned sixteen and his parents desired to get him married. They asked him to participate in the fair. Indra, daughter of Bhadriprasad of the village Jamtal, selected Vishu



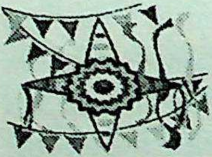
from amongst a score of contenders. Vishu was equally impressed by her beauty. Vishu and Indra were thus married with the blessings of their parents.

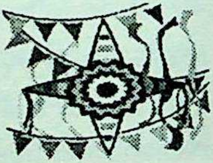
Two years later, Indra gave birth to a baby girl. Harihar and Chandrawati were overjoyed at the arrival of the baby girl, for, it was their life's desire to have a daughter. This was like a dream come true for them. Harihar wanted to celebrate the birth of his grand-daughter on a grand scale. He talked to Vishu, who readily agreed. A grand feast was planned. Invitations were sent to one and all in the village. Friends and acquaintances from nearby villages were also invited.

Since the day Vansraj had left his home, there was no communication between the father and the son. But Vansraj had learned about the adoption of Vishu by his parents, from the villagers. Vansraj and Devakala were childless, although it was almost twenty years since they were married. Vansraj had now realized his mistake. But it was too late. He was remorseful and wanted to meet his parents to seek forgiveness. But the very thought of having to face Vishu, an adopted child who had looked after Harihar and Chandrawati like an exemplary son, always put him to shame. He found himself helpless.

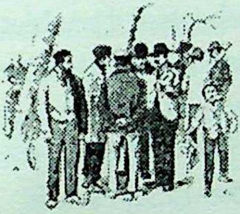
Devkala learned about the birth of the baby girl to Vishu and Indra from the village women. She passed on this information to Vansraj. Vansraj felt that this was the most opportune time for them to go to Manjihara to meet his parents and participate in the celebrations. "What if my parents rebuke me?" thought Harihar, "Don't they have every right to do so?" He consulted his wife and she endorsed his views.

On reaching Manjihara, Vansraj and Devakala were astonished to find the village decorated with colourful motifs. Roads and paths were spick and span. Harihar's home was tastefully decorated. On coming closer, they saw Harihar and Chandrawati sitting on the dias, draped in silks and adorning jewels. Some people had gathered around them, while some others were in the lawn enjoying the drinks. A couple gorgeously dressed and bedecked with garlands, was moving around to personally welcome the guests.



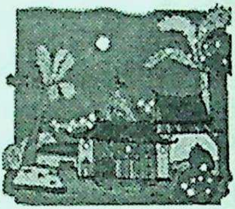


Vansraj and Devakala did not take time to realize that the couple was none other than Vishu and Indra. A humbled but nervous Vansraj, sweating profusely, moved towards his parents on the dias.

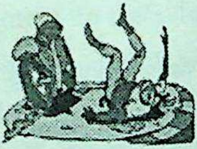


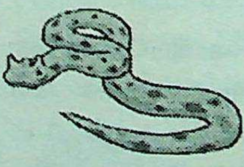
Harihar spotted his son in the crowd. The old man whispered into Chandrawati's ear. Chandrawati was thrilled. Vansraj came running and fell at their feet. Tears rolled down his eyes. Chandrawati lifted Vansraj and embraced him. So did Harihar. He then called out to Vishu and Indra, who stood motionless witnessing the scene of this reunion. Harihar introduced Vansraj and Devakala to them. Vishu and Indra were pleased to meet them.

At the sunset, the whole area was illuminated with earthen lamps. Harihar and Chandrawati made it a point to personally meet and greet people. Vansraj and Devakala in the meantime went around the farms. They were surprised at the sight. They realised that Vishu had put



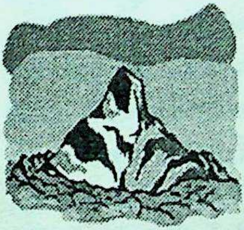
in a lot of hard work in developing the farms. When they returned, dinner was being served to the guests. Harihar and Chandrawati were busy looking after the guests. Vansraj and Devakala joined them. Not finding Vishu around, Vansraj asked Devakala to look for him and call him out.

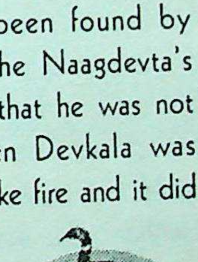




Devakala had hardly reached the entrance of the house, when Vansraj and others saw her falling down. They ran towards her and saw her rubbing her right foot and crying in pain. Vansraj looked at her foot and realised that she was bitten by a snake. Vansraj lifted her and laid her on a cot inside the house. Vishu, noticing the ruckus, sprinted to the spot and found Devkala struggling for life. Harihar in the meantime went to fetch Dhaneswar, who was well known for treating those bitten by snakes. Dhaneswar came and examined Devkala. She was already dead. Dhaneswar told Harihar that she had been bitten by a poisonous Naag and was no more. A pall of gloom fell over everybody. The tragic news reached all the corners of the village in no time. Those very people who had come for dinner, were now offering their condolences and paying their homage to the deceased.

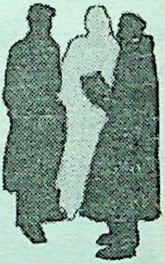
Devakala's body was cremated the next day. At the insistence of Harihar and Vishu, Vansraj stayed back in his father's house. But one question that bothered him all the while was, where did this *Naag* come from? This village had never witnessed any such thing earlier.





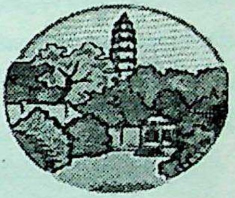
Some mischievous person in the village rumoured that it was Vishu, who had taken the form of a Naag and bitten Devkala. To make the story more receptive, he reminded the villagers that Vishu had been found by Harihar at the Naagdevta's temple and that he was not around when Devkala was bitten. Soon, the rumour spread like fire and it did not take much time to reach the ears of Vansraj. Vansraj did not buy the story initially but felt gradually convinced. The turn of events was disastrous for Harihar and his family. They felt helpless. They knew very well that the rumour was false, yet they could not reveal the facts. Harihar was in a dilemma. If he revealed the truth, Vishu would not live, and if he didn't, Vansraj would kill him to take revenge. Either way, it meant Vishu's death.

Convinced that Vishu was responsible for the death of his wife, Vansraj took the case to village elders and wanted a death penalty for Vishu. The village elders counselled between themselves and formed a panel of five wisest amongst them. It was decided that the panel would listen to both the parties and then deliver its judgement. Harihar, though head of the village, was not included in the panel. He felt helpless. Indra too was in a state of shock. She could not believe the story of her husband being a Naag. She tried hard to extract the truth from Chandrawati, but Chandrawati was struck dumb by the shock. She could not utter a word. She looked helplessly at Harihar, who was weeping inconsolably. Harihar incessantly pleaded for mercy from Vansraj, saying that Vishu was innocent. But Vansraj was adamant. He however agreed to grant his father a period of ten days to prove Vishu's innocence.



Vansraj left his father's house but not before reminding his parents that he would return on 11th day to avenge his wife's death.

Harihar was numbed by the shock. He could not think of a way to save Vishu. He recalled the long spell of poverty he had faced and how his life was transformed with the birth of Vishu? Vishu had showered so much of love and affection on them that he felt his ties with Vishu were there since his previous birth. Three days elapsed in the process and he was yet to find a way to save Vishu.



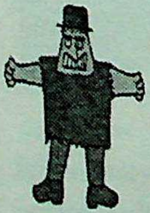
On the fourth day, Harihar rose very early in the morning. He took a bath and set towards the Naagdevta's temple. He offered prayers and with his eyes closed, prayed for safety of Vishu. In a flash, the name of Kaliprasad struck his mind.

Harihar remembered that Vishu at the time of his resurrection had told him and his wife that if they revealed the truth about his resurrection on their own, his soul would escape leaving his mortal frame. But Harihar was sure, if someone other than him and his wife could prove that Vishu was not a Naag, he could be saved. Only Kaliprasad could do it.

Harihar knew very well that Kaliprasad was not in proper senses. But, he felt that on seeing Vishu alive, Kaliprasad may regain his wits. He reached home and discussed his plan with Chandrawati, who felt that it was worth a try. He decided to leave for village Rundhwa without any delay.

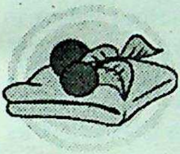
Satyadev greeted Harihar very warmly. Without revealing the facts, Harihar told him that he wanted to take Kaliprasad with him so that he could get him treated. It was very late in the evening, so they decided to leave in search of Kaliprasad early next morning.

Harihar was restless for whole of the night. He could not get a wink of sleep. Satyadev woke up early in the morning, only to find that Harihar was ready waiting for him. Both of them left for the temple where Kaliprasad generally spent his nights. On reaching the temple, Harihar called out to Kaliprasad. Kaliprasad was there. He looked up into the sky and muttered "Vishu is there. Why don't you get him?" Harihar put his arm over his shoulder and comforted him, "I will get your Vishu

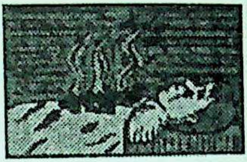


back. Will you accompany me?" Kaliprasad looked at Harihar, hung his head down and lamented, "Nobody can get him back."

Kaliprasad resisted moving out from the premises but Harihar was determined to take him along. After a lot of cajoling and persuasion, he managed to take Kaliprasad with him. Harihar took him to the river, bathed him and changed him into a new set of clothes. Together they had a good meal. But, all the while Kaliprasad asked for Vishu. Harihar assured him that he would take him to Vishu.



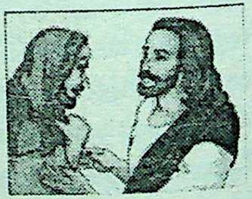
On their way back, Harihar stopped at the spot where he had dug out earth for making dolls almost two decades back. Harihar engraved Vishu's name on the soft earth with his fingers and called out to Kaliprasad, who was contantly gazing at the sky. Kaliprasad turned around and slowly moved towards Harihar. He came closer and sat besides him. As soon as his eyes fell on the name engraved on the ground, he leapt to the spot, took some earth from it and rubbed it on his face. Tears began rolling down his eyes. He kissed the ground and wailed, "Yes. Vishu is here. I killed him with my own hands and



burnt his body here. Can I get him back?" Harihar did not console him as he wanted Kaliprasad to recall the entire episode very precisely. On regaining his composure, Kaliprasad again pleaded with Harihar to get him Vishu.

Noticing a quick transformation in Kaliprasad's behaviour, Harihar altered his plan. He spent the night in a shelter nearby and returned to Rundhwa village in the morning. Satyadev was surprised to see them back. He thought that Harihar had changed his mind to take Kaliprasad to his home.

Without giving an inkling of his real plans, Harihar related the happenings of the day to Satyadev. Satyadev was shocked to learn that Vishu was not alive and it was Kaliprasad himself who had murdered him. However he agreed with Harihar that this was not the time to harbour any ill-will against Kaliprasad as he was highly repentant. Kaliprasad looked very calm and composed, though very penitent. Harihar and Satyadev decided to tactfully interrogate Kaliprasad and find out if he remembered how and why he killed Vishu? Kaliprasad gradually narrated the entire story.



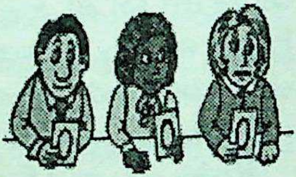
His version matched totally with that of Vishu's story. Harihar then asked him to describe Vishu's features. Harihar was amazed to find that the description exactly matched with those of the present Vishu.

Harihar and Kaliprasad stayed at Satyadev's place for two more days. Harihar asked Kaliprasad many questions pertaining to him and Vishu, only to ensure that he remembered his past correctly. Satyadev on the other hand was ignorant about Harihar's plans but he did not ask any questions. He thought that Harihar was very much concerned with the well being of Kaliprasad and that was why, he was asking him to remember his past.

Harihar requested Satyadev to keep Kaliprasad at his home and bring him to the Manjihara village-rostrum at the time of sunset on a particular day. He assured Satyadev that everything about his plans to treat Kaliprasad will be revealed to him there. On reaching home, Harihar related all the happenings to his wife. She felt relieved and both of them decided to keep the whole thing a closely guarded secret.

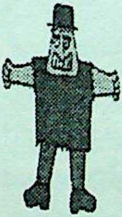
Some time before the sunset on the appointed day, Vansraj came to his parents' house. He took Vishu to the village rostrum for the trial by

the panel of judges. Vishu was still in the state of shock. Indra was wailing. Harihar and Chandrawati, though anxious, maintained their composure. Villagers in a good number had assembled in the ground near the rostrum. A majority of villagers, though not sure of Vishu's roots, prayed for his life.



The judges assembled at the rostrum at the appointed time. It was decided that Vansraj was the victim and justice had to be meted out to him, but not before Vishu was given an opportunity to defend himself. Vishu was called upon and asked to present his case. Vishu vehemently denied the allegation but did not have any proof or witness to support his statement. Vishu felt helpless and looked around for his father. He saw a restless Harihar looking anxiously towards the path leading to river Sarada. Vishu, not knowing anything about Harihar's meeting with Kaliprasad, thought that it was to hide his agony and helplessness that his father had turned his face away from him. The judges asked Vishu to sit in a corner till they deliberated amongst themselves.

Deliberations among the judges were in the last stage, when far away on the village path, two men were seen hurriedly coming towards the rostrum. Harihar's face lit up at the sight of Kaliprasad and Satyadev. As soon as they reached the place, Satyadev was surprised to notice that some elderly persons were deliberating between themselves and something serious was going on. Harihar welcomed both of them and asked them to sit down. Harihar was anxious. He was not sure if Kaliprasad would recognise Vishu and if his much-thought-of scheme would work. He took Kaliprasad's hand in his own hand and before he could say anything, he heard Vishu's wails. He turned his head towards the corner of the rostrum, where Vishu was sitting, and so did Satyadev and Kaliprasad. In a flash, Kaliprasad released his hand from that of Harihar, and jumped on to the rostrum. Like a mad person, he gazed at Vishu's face in utter disbelief. He shouted at the top of his voice "I have found my Vishu, I have found my Vishu" and lifted him up and hugged him and kissed his face and hands like a hysteric. He got him in his lap down from the rostrum and took him upto Satyadev, shouting "Here is my Vishu. He is alive. He is alive." Satyadev was



surprised. The boy held by Kaliparasad was really Vishu. Satyadev looked at Harihar with curiosity. Harihar signalled him to be patient for a little time more. Kaliprasad was running from person to person and telling them, "This is my brother Vishu. God has sent him back for me. Don't ever take him away again". Vishu's condition was pathetic. He did not know what was happening and what was further in store for him.

There was pandemonium all around. Judges stopped their deliberations. People were aghast, not knowing what was happening. Satyadev and Vansraj were utterly confused. Harihar and his wife were overwhelmed with joy. They were sure that the worst was over and Vishu would be saved.

Harihar stood up. He requested all to keep silence. He requested judges to suspend their deliberations for a while and ask Kaliprasad to reveal who he was and what did he know about Vishu. Kaliprasad was sobbing and his eyes were full of tears. He was still holding Vishu's head in his lap.

It took Satyadev and Harihar some time to console

Kaliprasad and prepare him to speak about him. He revealed all about himself and Vishu and also gave details of how and where he killed Vishu to grab his property. Kaliprasad told the judges that he stabbed Vishu in the stomach first and then inflicted a deep wound on his head. The whole story was like a fairy tale being unfolded. Even Vansraj could not believe his ears.

Under instructions from the judges, Vishu's head and abdomen were examined. To their amazement, scars were found on his head and abdomen in the manner described by Kaliprasad. There was great commotion. Vishu's identity was proved beyond doubt.

Satyadev was not sure what was going on. He spoke to a few villagers sitting near him and came to know all about Harihar's family. He came to know that the meeting was held to decide if Vishu was a Naag and if he had really bitten Vansraj's wife? He also came to know that Harihar had found Vishu at the

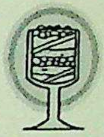
Naagdevta's temple. Things were getting now clear to Satyadev. He came to the conclusion that Harihar's main aim was to prove Vishu's innocence. "But where from did he actually got Vishu?" Satyadev was yet to know that.

Judges accepted the statements of Kaliprasad and Satyadev and concluded that Vishu was not a Naag and could not have bitten Vansraj's wife. The verdict was accepted by all including Vansraj. But the Judges wanted to know why Harihar did not reveal the truth himself?

Harihar was a relaxed person now. He explained that he could not reveal the facts earlier because of certain compulsions. He explained in detail, how he got Vishu resurrected from his ashes after moulding him into a doll. "And Vishu would have died again, if I had myself revealed his identity to anybody", said Harihar with a choked voice. "Since I was bound to keep his identity a secret, I had no option but to hide his resurrection as well. And that was why I concocted the story of having found him at the Naagdevta's temple".

Everyone was joyous at the turn of events. Vansraj

felt ashamed for his behaviour. He went up to his parents asking for forgiveness. Harihar and Chandrawati were happy and decided to celebrate the event by throwing a party. All the villagers were invited to a grand dinner.



During the celebrations, Harihar requested Satyadev to give his daughter Rajlakshmi in marriage to his son Vansraj. Satyadev readily accepted. Kaliprasad was also present. He expressed his desire to spend the rest of his life in service of Harihar and his family, which everybody accepted with open heart.

And all of them lived happily ever after.

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Acc. No. 318 (D)
Dated 6-7-97

Reviews of 'tsók módúr', a collection of short stories in Kashmiri by M.K.Raina

- It is an excellent effort specially in the revised Devanagari. I have so far read the first story. It is very good and sound like that you posess an excellent creative ability.

- Dr. Roop K. Bhat, New Delhi

- I read the first short story as soon as I received the book and found it to be very interesting.

- M.K.Kaw, President AIKS, New Delhi

- The stories are highly interesting and full of nostalgia. But what impressed me more than this was the fact that the stories were not 'alien' in any way. The emphassis that has been laid on the smallest possible detail shows the author's command over the characters. I am highly impressed by the writing.

- Samvit Rawal, Pune

- The book is like a bowl of jewels. I must say that these are wonderful stories and represent our Kashmiri psyche, our living style, language and almost all aspects of our unique cunltural identity.

Dalip Langoo, New Delhi

- I have enjoyed reading all short stories in tsók módúr. Though themes vary but they are quite interesting and revolve around everyday happenings, incidents and familiar characters. What has impressed me the most is the use of effective language and style.

- Prof. Omkar N. Koul, New Delhi

Reviews of 'tsók módúr' (continued)

- Shri Raina's thought provoking, hyper sensitive and touchy short stories will definitely go a long way in enriching our Kashmiri literature as well as giving suitable reward to the author that he deserves.

- Ravinder Ravi (AIR), New Delhi

- Yet another book worth a million dollar mention in all community journals is Tsok Modur by Shri MK Raina. The book, first of its kind has created sensation in the literary circles. In this age of materialistic world such a work is really impossible.

- Naad, New Delhi

- 'Nasihath' is the best story in the collection. Teenage psychology has been portrayed in a very lively manner. It shows that the writer has immense possibilities in him and we should not be surprised if in very near future he is rated among outstanding fictionists of Kashmiri language.

- Dileep K.Kaul, New Delhi

- भाषा ठेठ कश्मीरी है और कश्मीरी मुहावरों, उक्तियों, तथा कहावतों से बुनी यह प्यारी प्यारी कहानियां पाठक को गुदगुदाती हैं। कहानियों में आधुनिक जटिलता परिलक्षित नहीं होती। कहानियों की भाषा सरल किंतु चरित्रों के अनुरूप है। सब पात्र स्वभाविक रूप में स्टेज (कहानी के कनवस) पर आकर अपनी गहरी छाप छोड जाते हैं। कहानियों में सोमदेव की कथा कहने की शैली को अपनाया गया है। मुझे आशा है कि एम.के.रैना जी कहानी रचन की ऊंचाइयों को पार करेंगे क्योंकि ऐसी रचना-शक्ति उन में मौजूद है।

- अर्जुन देव मजबूर, जम्मू

Reviews of 'tsók módúr', a collection of short stories in Kashmiri by M.K.Raina

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- The inner fire mixed with sensitive nativity reflected through these stories, touches our own personality and concern somewhere. A concern for the people of his clan and community, fire of writing and penmanship add all the credit to the book.

- P.L.Zutshi (Harmukh), Dehradun

- बडॖ मॉर्यमोंद तॖ दिलचस्प। अफसानॖ छि अख ॲकिस ख्वतॖ। अख ज़न तॖ असॖल कॉशुर माहोल पॉदॖ करान। म्यानि तरफॖ गछ़ि एम.के.रैना सॉबस हथ हथ मुबारक द्युन

- बिमला रैना, जम्मू

- The book is an excellent piece of work by Mr. Raina. I suggest all Kashmiri Pandits should own it as a collector's copy.

- R.K.Matoo (aalav), Bangalore

- The stories are lucidly written and are so true to life in the Valley. **'tsók módúr'** of Shri M.K.Raina is a welcome addition to Kashmiri Literature.

- Vitasta, Kolkata

- This book of short stories is based on realities of Kashmiri life described in sweet and heart-warming Kashmiri language. Mr. Raina has revealed himself as an artist of rare sensitivities and faculties. He has masterly opened the vistas and focused on the inherent beauty of this language.

- Dr. B.K.Moza, Kolkata

(Contd. on inside cover)